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AZHORT, THE AXMAN; or, THE SECRETS OF THE DUCAL PALACE.

BY ANTHONY P. MORRIS,

Author of "Franz, the French Detective," "The Man of Steel," etc., etc.



"WRETCH! YOU SHALL NOT LIVE TO BETRAY ME!" SAID CLADIUS, DASHING UPON THE MAN MONSTER.

Azhort, the Axman:

OR,

The Secrets of the Ducal Palace.

A ROMANCE OF VENICE.

BY ANTHONY P. MORRIS,
AUTHOR OF "FRANZ, THE FRENCH DETECTIVE,"
"THE MAN OF STEEL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

LOVERS AND SPIES.

VENICE!—incomparable in beauty, still lingering in that historic and vision-like prosperity which at last outlived all other Italian republics.

Venice!—with its domes and spires, its columns, frescoes and palaces, its ways of glistening waters mingling in the dream of wealth, poetry and splendor.

Venice!—ere the "man of destiny" had fixed his eye upon it; the time being in the sixteenth century, and the hour of the day—preceding Ascension Day—near sunset, when the gold of buildings flashed and massy marble seemed to gather even fresher whiteness in the clear wan-

ing day

Upon the canal—what was and ever will be

the Grand Canal—three gondolas were gliding upward, the first and the third curtained, draped and painted with a similarity which, in those days, denoted that they belonged to one and a noble house—rich in purple and gilt and gondoliered in livery.

The second was plain and unpretentious, save for its unusually sharp and polished prow of steel, which clove the water like a very knife—this prow surmounted by a bronze image of a winged lion—and the singularity that everything pertaining to its color and accouterment was black as the bosom of a thunder-cloud.

A fourth gondola was approaching the three, coming downward, sculled by a man whose flowing beard and wrinkled face would betoken a professional at his vocation.

In this last curtained craft, reclining upon its furnishings of soft and costly cushions, was a young and handsome man; bold though easy of mien; feature and limbs of health and strength—his supple carriage nigh concealed by an awkward attire indicating that he was, or pretended to be, a rough fisherman. A singular occupant for a boat so gayly dressed as that in which we find him.

His eyes, dark and flashing, were peeping slyly between the curtains; but the flash was one of pleasant anticipation, and his lips smiled as he steadfastly watched the three approaching gondolas.

"Ah!" he murmured, "you would not fail me, blest Adria! Unconcerned though I seem, your love can pierce these very rags and find the loyal heart beneath. I await, Adria. Less haste, Piero, with your good oar"—to the skillful gondolier without. "The craft yonder will be with us soon enough with its precious burden."

"Ay, Captain Cladius, but—"

"Hist! Not so loud that name. For the same reason that I address you as Piero, remember that I am simply Santo, the fisherman, spending in *caffè* and gondola a sum of sequins inherited from the fish-barrels of a dead relative."

"Let my tongue blister for my forgetfulness!" exclaimed the man, Piero. "But I was about to say—"

"Say on, good Piero," urged the supposed fisherman, again bending his eager gaze out between the curtains.

"I meant to say in warning to you—Santo, the fisherman—that the first gondola, which I know to contain your betrothed, the beautiful Adria, is closely followed by two others. The first behind is—"

"Ah! yes. The first. That somber, thievish-looking thing which glides so stealthily and swift. I know it well."

"It is the gondola of that devil's shape, Azhort, once chief executioner of Venice. I much distrust the motive of its presence. The second behind—"

"I recognize it. Like my own Adria's, it belongs to the Trienti palace."

"And, no doubt, contains the Lady Perci herself," declared the suspicious Piero. "Hear me, Commander Cladius—pah! my villainous tongue will yet bring me to dangle by the heels on the *pizzetta*. I am sure that the frequent delays in the return of the beautiful Adria, from her academy at sunset, has excited surmise in the mind of the cat, Lady Perci, and one, if not both of yonder gondolas are in pursuit."

"Now, my faithful friend," said the young man, so absorbed with expectation as to unheeded the wise warning of his companion, "give it that old and favorite curve of yours and we will be side by side."

The first gondola was at hand. The oarsmen of both, understanding by previous experience, brought their boats skillfully together until the curtains of each fairly touched the other.

Then these curtains were pushed aside, and two lovers, entirely shielded by the rich drapery, were clasped in a fervent embrace.

"Adria! My own! My beautiful!"

"Dear Cladius!—But, for the love of Heaven, detain me not. See: close to us comes the gondola of Lady Perci, my mother. You know full well the consequences of discovery to you and to me. Did she so much as suspect your presence in Venice! Indeed, I begin to fear that she does already suspect. But a few days since she threatened me with the mad-house if ever I dared to utter your name again. I have been followed steadily by her. She will discover all, and even the excuse of the academy will not avail us for a meeting. What will become of me? Ah! that terrible mad-house!"

The voice of Piero broke forth upon the outside, speaking to himself:

"Ho! there are his eyes—eyes that I could swear to among a million as belonging to that devil's shape, Azhort, ex-chief of the executioners. He is abreast. Something passes between him and that cat, Lady Perci. Eh? He comes this way. Now, by St. Mark! if he gets within reach of my oar I shall break it over his wolf's head!"

Cladius and Adria, absorbed solely with each other, notwithstanding her fear of discovery by Lady Perci, the enemy of her lover, paid but slight heed, at the moment, to the mutterings of the supposed gondolier, especially as she had bestowed no particular attention upon the black gondola, thinking only of the catlike watchfulness and unrelaxing pursuit of her stern, high-tempered mother.

"That is a strange threat from a mother's lips, sweet Adria—to place one so fair and promising as you in the horrible precincts of the mad-house. Think you she could be so cruel—that she meant it?"

"May Heaven forgive the thought, dear Cladius!—I fear she would not hesitate to threaten and do even worse if I persist in scorning the suit of Adio Adello, son of my step-father's sister."

"Lazzagon! I will yet settle an account with him. But be patient, my own Adria; yet a little longer. And when I have shown the Council that Cladius Alburno is still a friend to fair but intrigue-pested Venice it will then be time enough to take you openly or fly with you beyond all reach. My own good ship is not far distant, and every gallant sailor on its deck would hail even the outlawed Cladius and rally to his standard. You would not have me go, like a beaten cur, with charges on my head?"

"No, Cladius—no," fervently responded the maiden. "But, there; I must depart. Farewell, dear Cladius."

At this instant the voice of Piero again broke forth, loud and angry:

"Keep off, there, thou dog of mischief! Would you sink us with that knife prow of yours? Back, I say!"

Cladius sprung to the opposite curtains. One quick glance showed him the black gondola scarce two lengths away, rushing down with its glistening prow of steel, evidently bent upon a collision.

He turned to warn Adria to flee; but she, though unconscious at the time of danger, and only in dread of her spying mother, had glided away as she bade her lover farewell.

The somber, snakish-looking gondola that followed first in the rear of Adria's held a hideous personage who, no less ardent than Lady Perci, had persistently followed the maiden since the moment that she left the academy to return homeward, according to daily habit.

It was Azhort, once chief of executioners, whose reeking ax and bowstringing assistants had severed the vital pulse of many people, both martyred and deserving in their fate, upon the *pizzetta* or in the strangling-chamber.

His legs were fearfully dwarfed, but in body and arm he was the personification of a Hercules; having a stoop to the shoulders—this stoop throwing forward a bronzed, beardless face, with a sullen-cunning, ferocious expression, and eyes black, brilliant, keen, that could stare like a cat, gleam with diabolical gayety, or flame with furious passion. Down below the collar of a costly velvet cape hung a mass of dark, wiry hair.

The eyes of Azhort were the theme and shudder of Venice—more particularly so during the long period in which he held the post of chief executioner. High and low cared not to encounter the glare of the tigerish orbs, whose depths seemed to say:

"Aha! you next. Another for my ax, or the strangling-chamber. Come, I have a fancy for that head of yours, if some bravo does not rob me of the pleasure!"

While, in reality, the thought of the impish executioner would be, as he surveyed a trembling countryman striving to avoid him and the fierce eyes in the mingling throng:

"Fool, thou! why should you run and start? I want not such carrion for my broad ax; some of the nobility—not offal for the arm of Azhort. Bah!"

The fiendish face and glistening eyes of the ex-chief of executioners peered sharply from the curtains of his black gondola, losing not one

movement of the light and gay liveried craft in which was Adria.

"Aha! pretty maid," he muttered, between his strong white teeth, and rubbing his horny palms, over and over, "aha! I think I scent the end of my mission here. Cladius Alburno, charged with treason, and upon whose head a price is set, must be in yonder waiting gondola; that is why the maid, Adria, lingers so late each evening when returning from the academy—to meet her Cladius. 'Tis said that upon the disappearance of Cladius, his own private gondola fell by sale to old Santo, the fisherman. Thunder of air! that will not wash. For what can there be in common between a fair and noble maid, such as Adria, and the fish-smelling Santo? No, she meets her Cladius thus. Let me remove him, or get him in my grasp, and perhaps the Council will make terms with Azhort—that is, if much remains of the Council two days hence; for the Duke D'Ossuna is a clever plotter, and there may be no Venice a few hours from now. I would that the time for pillage were already here; then, down with the Trienti palace, and expose the secret which I believe it has closed in for so many years! But the gondolas. Oh! they are twirling round—now they touch. Plagues infernal take those curtains!—they conceal the face of one who is, I am sure, Cladius Alburno, the traitor. *Cid*, gondolier, ease away, but keep nigh to those two craft ahead."

"I obey," answered the fellow, who was new in the employ of the ex-headsman, and who had been induced by abject poverty and promise of good pay, to risk his body in the service of the man of dread.

Simultaneously the somber curtains were thrust aside by a jeweled hand, and the face of a haughty woman looked in upon Azhort.

"Ha! how dare you! Oh! the Lady Perci Trienti!" he exclaimed.

The third and last of those gondolas previously mentioned, well known as belonging to the Trienti palace, contained a single female occupant.

A woman not unhandsome, save for the proud, overbearing mien, and a frown that came and went, as if in spasms of ever-changing and ever-unpleasant thoughts—Lady Perci Trienti, second wife of Marco Trienti, the senator, and reputed mother of Adria.

She was muttering from her thin, scarlet lips:

"So, I knew I should learn the cause of those delays common to Adria's return from the academy. Lovers are indeed foolish to imagine that others have neither eyes, ears, nor suspicion. Though Cladius Alburno is charged with treason and outlawed—and, I doubt not, sought for by the spies of The Ten—that is his gondola, and, to a certainty, he is in it. For what? To maintain his hold upon Adria's affections—deluded girl!—by sweet compliments and lessons of rebellious doctrine. Oh! would that I could be a man but for an hour! My anathema or Cladius Alburno, who steals the affections of Adria from my favorite, Adio. There is Adio, this moment, standing at the quay. Has he no eyes? Can he not see that the robber of his intended bride is now holding interview with her? Stay—there is one who can do me a service: Azhort, the headsman. Lay close to the black gondola ahead," she ordered, sharply.

In obedience, her oarsman brought the curtained side fairly touching that of the black gondola containing Azhort, just as that person had commanded his servitor to sheer off abreast of the two gondolas of the lovers.

The sudden and unexpected intrusion of the female face, half-handsome, half-ugly in passion, momentarily startled even the iron nerves of Azhort.

"Ha! how dare you?" he snapped; adding in the same breath: "Oh! the Lady Perci Trienti."

"Ay, she it is. Thou art Azhort—lover of both gold and blood."

"True."

"Take this purse. It is heavy with reward."

"And what am I to do for it?" questioned the deathsman, as he grasped the proffered purse.

"A double service; one for me—one for The Ten."

"Oh! as for that, I am ready to serve Lady Perci, or The Ten, for the merit of my deeds alone," declared Azhort, with his piercing eyes fixed so intently upon her that she could not suppress a sensation of chilliness. And he continued, though deep in his dark mind: ("The first, because I have an object to attain in the Trienti palace; the second, because, by doing the Council a precious favor, I may be again called, as chief executioner of Venice, to swing my beloved ax upon the necks of all such nobles as the Trienti!") Then aloud: "But come, what is it that I am to do for the Lady Perci Trienti?"

"Mark yonder gondolas lying so closely together."

"I see. Tight as rivets. Well?"

"The furthest holds my daughter, Adria—"

"I know that."

"The nearest has in it that infamous traitor, Cladius Alburno."

"Ha! I suspected as much. But how can you be sure?"

"I am not deceived. Run down the last; sink it with your prow of steel, which I know to be

famed for its sharpness. When you can inform me, truly, that Cladius Alburno is drowned in this canal, or that your dagger has found his life, another and larger purse shall be yours."

"Good. We shall see."

Lady Perci was then borne swiftly away toward that landing where she had observed the nephew of her husband, Adio Adello.

"I will take him in with me," was her thought; "and together we shall view the death of the man who has dared to steal the heart of Adria."

But Adio, who had recognized all the gondolas, believed that the approach of Lady Perci was due to certain excited signs and gestures which he made to attract it when the boat of Azhort, acting promptly on the wishes of the malignant woman, turned and dashed forward for the collision.

CHAPTER II.

THE STEEL PROW OF AZHORT.

ADIO ADELLO, nephew of Marco Trienti, the senator—at a time when both nobility and office were hereditary in Venice—and only male heir to that noble, was not an ornament to the society in which one of his birth and peerage ought naturally to mingle.

Having no remembrance of father or mother, and his education being confided solely to an *abbate* fond of amusement and wine, the mind of the youth had drifted into a choice rather for celebrity among the lower classes than an association of mediocrity with those of talent and elevation.

Unlike the usual frequenters of the poor *caffè*, however, the pocket of Adio was generally well-lined with money bountifully furnished by Lady Perci, with whom he was a great favorite. His acquaintances numbered a host, and he had attained both popularity for spending and notoriety for his amusing conceit.

Twelve years had passed since Marco Trienti and Adio had entered the palace of Lady Perci—the former as the second husband of that lady. No children had been born of their marriage. But Adria was there—even then in mere childhood giving promise of a maturity that would one day be famously beautiful—and from earliest recollection of meeting her, Adio had resolved that she should wed him.

It was the purpose of Lady Perci to consummate a match between Adria and Adio; and now, when the maiden had reached the age of eighteen years, she had begun the unwinding of her long-spun plans.

Notwithstanding the jealous seclusion imposed by eminent Venetian domestic rule upon unmarried females—and with unusual rigor by Lady Perci upon Adria—Adria was at last capable of judging for her own heart, and one day greatly astonished all by announcing her love for Cladius Alburno, then one of the most youthful but renowned commanders in the Venetian fleet. But for this development, startling enough to Lady Perci, it is probable that the persistent scheming of Adria's reputed mother would have effected the marriage with Adio.

There was nothing in the face, figure or behavior of Adio Adello likely to win a prize such as Adria. Cladius was every inch the man to excite both admiration and confidence.

Up to the time, then, of this story's opening—and to the great discomfiture of Lady Perci—neither plot, threat nor persuasion had succeeded in altering or turning elsewhere a particle of that grand adoration which the pure girl, with the approval of Heaven, had nourished for Cladius.

"It can never be done," Lady Perci had meditated, many times, "until Cladius Alburno is either dead or banished beyond her reach. So fixed is the headstrong thing, that I believe bolts nor bars could keep them apart. I vow—yes I vow he shall be gotten out of my path! But how?—how with safety? Let me think on that. He is no boy, to be whipped from the field at a single blow. Some means must be devised, even to the knife of a hired bravo. No one man shall stand between me and my long-cherished plans. When the daughter of Lady Perci Trienti weds the nephew of my husband, there will be combined the greatest wealth of any noble family in Venice. Ha! ha! and I shall share it—oh, yes!—and gold, gold itself, shall yet make me a queen. My daughter, said I?—well, so she is, for all the world knows. At the proper time—when Adria and Adio are wedded—the secret I have kept for eighteen years need be secret no longer!"

It was shortly after one of these soliloquizing moods that the blow contrived by Lady Perci fell upon unsuspecting Cladius Alburno.

As quickly as though smitten by the cimeters of those Turks against whom he had fought with valor and success, he was cut down. Tidings reached him that The Council had already proclaimed him a traitor, even while he panted amid the laurels of his victories, and urged by trusty friends he retired with such secrecy and disguise that, as yet, soldier or spy had failed to discover his whereabouts.

Supposing that Cladius was no longer within the boundaries of the Republic, Lady Perci renewed her importunities in behalf of her favorite Adio. The suit was resented more strongly

than ever, and in her anger consequent to another unprofitable interview with Adria, Lady Perci had uttered that threat of punishment by confinement in a mad-house which shocked, terrified, but did not subdue the maiden's loyal spirit.

Aroused at last to suspicion, both by Adria's firmness and the fact of frequent delays beyond the accustomed hour of her return from the academy, Lady Perci had on this day acted the part of a spy, with results shown and to follow.

Adio, standing upon the quay, was attired gaudily, and wore a cap of crimson plume; his waist encircled by a rich sash.

He happened accidentally there, at the foot of the narrow street, just as the three gondolas were passing. Knowing them well, and though he could not see the occupant of the first, his heart throbbed deliciously at thought of her whom he hoped soon to call his bride—for the voice of the Council, which had denounced Cladius as a traitor, and the sudden and complete disappearance of that person, left the youth to imagine that he was successfully rid of his rival.

But the fourth gondola, as it twirled about and lay close to Adria's, puzzled, while it caused him some uneasiness; for he knew that it had belonged to Cladius Alburno before Cladius had vanished so mysteriously, and the junction of this with the other, and its lingering there, struck him strangely.

"Pah! Why should I vex myself?" he exclaimed, overcoming a momentary pulse of jealous suspicion. "Though yonder gondola belonged to my rival, Cladius Alburno, I am sure that he would not dare be in it, for the spies of The Ten would quickly seize him. But why should the two thus join and tarry? I cannot understand—Eh, fellow? what now?"

"Right, signore," whined a voice at his side—the voice of a very shabby man who carried a scissored and idiotic-looking dog in his arms. "Right, signore. That is, or was, the gondola of Cladius Alburno, once as famous a chieftain as ever fought ship to ship with a Turk. Buy this beautiful dog and I will tell you all about it. See what a babe. If it would but have wings—ah! then it might be an angel. And so cheap—"

"Away with your dog!" smartly retorted Adio, who was then watching the movements of Lady Perci's gondola, as it swept alongside the somber craft of Azhort, the deathsman.

"Oh, well, then I will tell you, anyhow, signore. Yonder gondola, after the noted Cladius was outlawed, fell, by purchase, to Santo. Santo was an old and poor fisherman. Some relative of his was called to Heaven, and Santo—how lucky!—fell heir to a mess of sequins that were found in an old cask. I knew Santo well, but since he has risen in the world, he avoids me—"

"Begone, gabbler!" snapped Adio; and to himself, while he made those signals which he thought attracted the gondola of Lady Perci: "There is some plot brewing out there, I swear by the saints! Why should a noble lady hold converse with such as Azhort?—Ha! the black gondola is dashing upon those two! Some mischief is to follow this. Body of Bacchus! my Adria will be drowned! See: a collision is intended! Devilish deathsman! what are you about?" and he tilted from foot to foot in excitement, as he saw the sharp steel prow of the black gondola shooting forward, propelled by muscular arms that appeared to work with the rapidity and strength of an engine.

"Oh, signore," again whined the shabby fellow; "you have quite forgotten. This dog which I offer you—"

"Imp! Depart!" cried Adio, who thought of nothing but the pending collision, and the jeopardy of Adria.

"But, so cheap—"

"Fool!"

"Thou!" spat back the dog-vender, nimbly running off; for Adio had thrust one hand into his bosom to grasp the dagger he carried there.

"Hasten!" he called to Lady Perci's gondolier. "Ply that sluggish oar. I must be out there to rescue my adorable Adria, who is about to be drowned by that crazy deathsman! Hasten, I say!—Eh? Oh! my Adria is fleeing. She is safe. But the gondola of Azhort still advances. There will yet be a collision. Now, what ill-will can Azhort bear a humble man like Santo, the fisherman, to whom—so said that pest-of-a-dog-man—the gondola of Cladius Alburno belongs, by purchase?"

"Enter, Adio—enter," urged Lady Perci, as the side of her gondola came to the steps. "Seat yourself with me. I have a pleasant spectacle in store for you."

"What could you, Lady Perci, have to say to that wretch, ex-chief of the executioners?" inquired Adio, as he seated himself on the rich cushions beside his uncle's wife.

"Patience. Watch the gondola of Azhort. Do you see what he is about to do?"

"Certainly. With that bow of steel, he is running down Santo, the fisherman, who could not possibly have done him harm."

"Santo, the fisherman." Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Lady Perci—a malicious and jarring laugh. "In that gondola, my dear Adio, is

none other than your formidable rival, Cladius Alburno. He and Adria have been at kissing and cooing under your very nose. Ah! there it goes—into the side. Did you hear the rip and strain of the splinters? A heavy purse I have promised Azhort if Cladius Alburno is drowned or stabbed to death in this canal!"

"My malediction on Cladius Alburno! And I hope the devilish deathsman will finish him!" ground out Adio, fired to a rage by what he had learned.

The eyes of Lady Perci flashed with cunning satisfaction at this. It was the first time that Adio had evinced any decided feeling of furious hatred for the man who contested with him for the love of Adria.

Unlike Lady Perci, he had no spirit for scheming, and a life of indolent pleasures had not yet framed in his nature the concomitant trait of all schemers to win a cause by fair means or foul. If there was one redeeming item in his foppish character, it was the honest passion he felt for Adria. Sincere to madness in his infatuation, he had hitherto dreamed only of impressing her with soft speeches and unmistakable devotion, thus outstripping his rival.

Lady Perci had at last awakened his uglier temper. She covertly scanned the features of the youth, her thin scarlet lips parting in a sinister smile.

And it was during the momentary glance into Adio's face, as the latter peered eagerly and tumultuously forth upon the exciting scene, that Lady Perci missed seeing an important part of the encounter which her malignance and bribe had fomented.

Upon the departure of Lady Perci's gondola, after speaking with Azhort, the bronzed and tigerish features of the headsman underwent a terrific change. A light fiercer than the fiercest gleam that ever shot from his horrible eyes, when bringing down his mighty ax upon the neck of a victim at the block, now kindled in the unearthly orbs. A grin as savage as the snarling muzzle of a hyena contorted his jaws, and he hissed, like the mouths of a score of serpents:

"Powers of darkness! what luck. Another purse—another, when I have drowned or stabbed Cladius Alburno; and he is before me! Heigh, gondolier! charge upon yonder boat with yellow trimming. Run it down. Straight into it. Sink it. Bend your muscles till they fairly break. Charge!"

The black gondola shot forward swift and straight, its prow of sharp and polished steel cleaving the water keenly as a razor's edge.

The dwarfed, misshapen but powerful body of Azhort strained forward in eager waiting for the collision, and his great muscular right hand gripped a shining dagger of extraordinary length and breadth.

"From your fingers alone, Lady Perci, will I receive that second purse promised. At last I have a good excuse for entering the Trienti palace. Once inside, I am sure that my ends can be attained; for Marco Trienti, and the wife who is deceiving and scheming against him, neither know as many secrets of their own household as Azhort carries locked in here"—giving his left breast a vigorous thump. "At this moment I carry in my pocket a map of those hidden passages of the palace which few now living could trace. Had they but connected with the outside world in some way, I would long ago have found the prize which I am sure is concealed there. Ho! I may now easily pass the servants and 'tenders, for see: I possess the signet of Lady Perci Trienti!" and he held aloft and surveyed with greedy gayety a costly ring which he had adroitly slipped from the finger of Lady Perci at the moment when he grasped the purse offered as a bribe for the death of Cladius Alburno.

The black gondola of the deathsman had now almost reached its prey, seeming to gather new velocity at every sweep of the oar.

"Keep off there!" hallooed the angry voice of Piero. "Dog of trouble! would you sink me with that knife-prow of yours? Back, I say!"

The bow of the assaulting boat was so close, and propelled at such speed, that all the skill of Piero—who was a most excellent oarsman—could not avert the intended catastrophe.

Scarce a half-minute elapsed between the two discoveries by Cladius—first, that there was to occur a premeditated collision; second, that Adria was gliding away from the danger therewith—and the crash of Azhort's steel prow squarely upon the side of the lighter gondola.

In that half-minute Cladius had vastly changed his appearance by thrusting under a seat the cap which he wore and substituting a stained and battered hat, at the same time fastening to his face a huge bunch of grizzly whiskers. With this sudden transformation he thoroughly represented old Santo, the fisherman.

Then there was a double cry—a shout from Azhort's gondolier and an angry yell from the indignant Piero—and with a thud, a crunch and a crash, the black gondola pierced the side of the frail boat, tearing, ripping and rending till the water poured through in spurting streams.

Cladius sprung forward upon the bow of the assailing boat. Not knowing why he should be attacked thus—believing his true identity safe in the disguise of Santo, the fisherman—he was furious at the insult, and made at once for the curtains, to confront—

The face of Satan, the eyes of a dragon, a spider shape that leaped promptly forward for the meeting.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the ex-chief of executioners, madder than the maddest inmate of the madhouse on the Lido. "Ha! ha! Cladius Alburno, I know you!"

"Wretch! you shall not live to betray me!" said Cladius, dashing upon the man monster.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Azhort, again, as they clinched upon the narrow deck. "Ha! ha! we shall see. You are to die by stabs and drowning in the canal here. Take this—and that!" And as he snarled "this and that," Azhort dealt two thrusts with his long, broad dagger.

The first blow was parried artfully; but the second—Cladius threw up his arms, uttered a gasping moan and tottered over into the water.

"On, quickly!" commanded the dwarf, slipping nimbly back to the shelter of his somber curtains. "On to my home.—Thou plague of ignorance! the other way. About! Haste!" And to himself: "Ho! now, to-night, for that other purse, and my entrance into the Trienti palace. Good. I have done admirably."

With the fall of Cladius, and his disappearance beneath the placid water, a shrill scream rung forth from the gondola which bore Adria away, and the sound called the attention of Lady Perci—from that momentary study of Adio's face—again to the scene of collision.

The gondola of the supposed Santo, the fisherman, had sunken almost entirely. The black gondola of Azhort was shooting rapidly off from the spot of disaster.

But the item which escaped Lady Perci's notice was: the oarsman to the boat of Azhort was not now the same who had so successfully served the diabolical will of the ex-chief of executioners.

Filled with righteous wrath, at the instant the two gondolas collided, Piero reached out and dealt the other gondolier a terrible stroke with the blade of the long oar which brought him to his knees. Bounding onto the other's deck, he grasped him by the throat, and at one jerk hurled him overboard.

"Help! I cannot swim! Mercy!" gurgled and gulped the unfortunate fellow, coming to the surface and beating the water frantically.

"Perish, thou knave!" cried Piero, sternly.

"Help!"

"Nay, perish there—and destroy no more gondolas of better men than thyself, to serve the wishes of a devil-master. Ay, go down again and again, and meet the corpse of my beloved captain whom you have aided to kill. Ay, down again. May you never come up!"

He was interrupted by the voice of Azhort, who, being so desperately engaged with Cladius had not observed the misfortunes of his own oarsman.

"On, to my home! Haste!"

"Ay, 'on to your home,'" hissed Piero, under his shaggy beard—a false beard, now, which he had whipped out of his bosom and quickly donned—as he snatched up the oar of the man he had hurled to death. "On it is, figure of fright! And be sure I shall not leave you until I know whether, indeed, you have dared to kill my noble commander. If so, may my arm palsied if it takes not speedy vengeance."

"Faster!" ordered Azhort.

Then a cry of surprise came from the interior of the gondola. As he was about to wipe the long, broad dagger on the lining of his mantle, he discovered that the shining blade was without blemish or stain—not one drop of blood on the smooth sides!

"Thunders of air!" was the cry of surprise. "Can it be possible that I missed my aim? Then he played the wounded man most excellently. This is strange; I am sure I felt it sink deep into his jacket"—glancing forth over the water. "Ho! there is an excitement out there. Lady Perci Trienti comes this way, perhaps to give me the second purse. I must not let her overtake me. Wait until to-night in the Trienti palace. Faster, fellow!" he snapped.

It was the intention of Lady Perci to complete the contract with the headsman at once and be rid of him. But the black gondola was soon far away.

CHAPTER III.

THE HEADSMAN'S FAMILY.

THE home of Azhort, once chief executioner of Venice, was situated at the extreme northwest of that cluster of islands which, in late days, was known as the New Lazaretto.

A square, low, massive stone structure, gray with age, and with the usual—but in this instance most neglected—garden at the rear. It had changed owners repeatedly during and subsequent to that notorious muddle of kingdoms and republics known in history as the League of Cambray, and finally became the castle of one whose vicious and shuddering nature of

calling fitly sorted with a building gloomy, treacherous and scowling of aspect.

Though some miles distant from the scene of conflict on the Grand Canal, the gondola of Azhort soon arrived at the step-stones of what was known as the "Deathsman's Fort,"—for on the broad, square roof, or rampart, were several pieces of brass cannon that had been captured and placed there at a period of war with the French.

Piero, the pretending gondolier, was well acquainted with the destination, and plied his oar as stoutly as if earnest in the employ of the man whom he hated from the depths of his heart, and swore vengeance upon, for the possible death of Cladius Alburno.

It was fortunate for the intentions of Piero that the ex-chief of executioners had bestowed no special scrutiny upon his new servitor—employed that very morn—and more fortunate that, as chance willed, Piero was, in his disguise, in close resemblance to that vagabond. Hence, having made the boat fast to the stairs before the dull-muzzled abode of Azhort, and having entered to the presence of that terrible man's family—Piero following by order—for it was mostly customary that a regularly employed gondolier became also the general servant—there ensued no discovery of the change in attendants which had occurred.

If the home of the deathsman was darkly foreboding without, its interior was even more strikingly impressive.

Like his gondola, like his somber cape of velvet, the cap he wore, the scowl over his eagle-and-tiger eyes, everything was black, black as the shadow of the earth over an eclipsed moon. Furniture, balustrade, ceilings and walls, even the flooring of mosaicked flags, were glossed in darkness, until the beholder could imagine himself in a vast tomb of polished black agate, pervaded by airs of ghostly whispering.

Though wealthy enough to enjoy all comforts of room and convenience, Azhort had his peculiarities and seemed rather fond of confining himself to a single apartment on the lower floor, where he took meals with his family, but invariably slept alone. This apartment was but a few steps from the front entrance, decked profusely with armorial trappings, helmets and plates of knights long dead, and containing the great two-handed sword and broad-bladed ax, with which his relentless arm had dealt the death-blow for many victims supplied by the dread Council of Ten when he was in the zenith of his career as chief executioner.

Straight to this lower chamber he led the way—Piero boldly in the rear—and presently joined his family: wife and son.

The wife was tall, gaunt, yellow-skinned, having but one eye that was watery and leering: feature and person coarse and awkward; voice that rasped and gurgled in the throat of a long, craning neck; movements those of a woman more masculine of habit than female.

The son, like the father, was dwarfed and ugly, dressed in black, tight, spangled garments, and seated, with twisted legs, on a high stool of ebon stain. On his head he wore a flimsy conical cap. His nose was long and pointed; mouth broad and narrow, and capable of a dunce-like grin, which, at times, displayed the teeth of a squirrel. His eyes were small, dark and cunning, and in their slightly sunken depths there dwelt a something that warned of a passion not safe to be aroused.

The coffin-hued furnishings, the armorial display, the virago wife, the eely-dwarfed son, all were closely observed by Piero; and when at last he stood fairly within the headsman's abode, he exclaimed, under his breath:

"By St. George! I have followed the lead of Satan. Here are his favorite imps. I am in a small kingdom of perdition. Poor chance would I have if they discover that not a simple gondolier but a lieutenant of the famous Cladius Alburno—whom the executioner hated enough to kill, or try to kill—has dared to enter the infernal home of Azhort, to spy and for vengeance. Fiends, all! they would flay me alive!"

The arrival of the lord of the household was hailed with a shout from the young dwarf upon the stool, and Bal-Balla, the wife, mumbled some brief words of recognition.

"Supper!" growled Azhort, sending his cap, with a twirl, across to the grasp of his grinning son.

"'Tis ready long since. Any news from the Palazzo Ducale?" answered and asked Bal-Balla.

"Oh! Hi! we have a new man!" squeaked Tobato, the junior dwarf, who had immediately fixed his snapping little eyes on Piero.

"I do not like the glance of that young rascal," passed in the mind of Piero. "It has not the fierceness of his father's, but it is even more prying and may discover that the beard and the wig I wear are false. To be known as a spy here would, undoubtedly, insure my death. Let me be ready." And he cautiously felt in his bosom to see if his stiletto was safely there.

"Let me know you, fine fellow," said the deformed youth, sliding from his stool and advancing like a spider over its silken web. "I am the son of Azhort. My name is Tobato—yours?"

"Piero, bless you, boy; a trusty gondolier, I hope."

"I think I like your looks—Piero—Piero," declared the dwarf, grinning more broadly, casting his snaky eyes first on the head, then on the body, then on the feet, and finally back to the face of Piero, as he repeated the name of that person twice and slowly. "Yes, you tickle my fancy. That great grizzly beard—I always liked big beards, though I cannot grow one myself. Hi! and hair of two colors—black and gray. How very odd! Look, mother: a man with hair of—"

"Cease your chatter, Tobato. Back to your seat—hear?—while I talk with your father. Sit you down in that corner, Rags." The last to Piero, and leveling a brown, brawny, hairy arm and claw-of-a-finger toward a distant part of the room.

Piero obeyed silently, keeping covert watch upon the grinning Tobato, whose eyes followed him intently, and whose supple coiled limbs cased in black reminded of some huge and poisonous spider, surmounted by the head of a clown and the expression of an imp, all ready to spring forward and bite, tear or devour.

A portion of the wig worn by Piero had slipped aside, betraying the true brown color of the hair beneath. By a dextrous movement he adjusted this as he sat down on the box indicated by Bal-Balla.

"When you ask for news," growled Azhort, using the Spanish language, and already munching hungrily at the bounty which Bal-Balla had spread before him—"when you ask for news, let me tell you that I have a plenty of it, which I only gathered this day"—chewing ravenously. "Listen, and you shall hear."

"You always said that my ears were both big and ugly. Go on with the news you bring," returned Bal-Balla, shortly, standing before him with arms akimbo and staring at him with her watery but steady one eye.

"Hi!" thought Tobato, as he continued his keen survey of Piero. "Hi! that fellow's hair is now all of one color—gray. What has become of the black patch I saw a moment since? I no longer see it."

Piero now transferred his attention to the fierce-looking couple at the table.

"Come, now," he muttered, though in a whisper smothered by his great beard, "there is to be some news gossip. I would like to hear what manner of news this man of devil's shape is accustomed to bring his family. He speaks in Spanish, and has either forgotten that I am here, or imagines that a poor gondolier has never learned aught but his own beloved dialect. Oh, but I am as good at Spanish, or Italian, or French, or Swiss."

"The Duke d'Ossuna does not want the crown of Naples," abruptly stated Azhort.

"Hoo! what mean you? Was it not for that the Council of Ten—as you and I know—was apprised of the intended revolt?"

"A trick. Bah! Nobles are full of tricks. You cannot swear, by their acts to-day, what they may do on the morrow."

"True enough. What, then, is the duke after?"

"The duke, the marquis and the ambassador—D'Ossuna, De Bedmar and Pedro de Toledo—seek the overthrow of the Republic, and select a time when Venetia is in almost open hostility to Spain. It is not the crown of Naples, but to commence with the pillage of Venice. So much for the sly duke."

"Hoo!" screeched Bal-Balla, excited on the instant. "Hoo! the pillage of Venice. That is it. Then fire!—sword!—riot! How gay! I am in! Let us have pillage! Viva! Good for the Duke d'Ossuna! Hoo!"

Bal-Balla rocked from foot to foot, swayed her body back and forth, waved her arms aloft and about, and tossed her head this way and that till its mass of coarse hair loosed and tangled over brow and shoulders, all the while shouting, "Hoo! Hoo!" in a burst of savage glee.

She uttered and shouted the words in the dialect of Venice, and her frenzied behavior and hints at its cause brought on contagion: for catching the spirit of his mother, and delighting in the prospect of fights and plunder, Tobato leaped from his stool and joined her, dancing, gyrating and contorting his spider shape, till he and the insane virago resembled a pair of hideous demons.

"Hi! Hi!" he yelled. "Oh, good! A riot! Burn and plunder! Hi! We'll drag out the nobles, the senators, and the doge, and cut off their heads! Hi!" and while he sprung hither and thither, on his elastic toes, he clapped his hands and hallooed with the throat of a creechowl.

Partaking of the excitement which his announcement created, Azhort bounded from the table to the wall and snatched down his broad-bladed and gleaming ax.

"Ay, pillage and fire!" he cried, hoarsely. "Let me try the weight of my pet ax. So! So! So! Light in darkness! my arm is young yet. So!—and so! Ha!" and round and round his wolfish head he circled the terrible ax like a ring of lightning flashes.

Bal-Balla worked her actions to a pitch of

madness; Tobato hopped and skipped. And loud "Hoo! - Hoos!" and shrill "Hi! - His!" filled the chamber with a scene and sound of revelous insanity.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TWO SPIES WORK.

The swift-circling ax, the shuddering glare in the eyes of the ex-chief of executioners and his demoniac countenance of passion; the wild cries and savage gestures of Bal-Balla and Tobato; the din of all and the portrayal of natures fiercely barbaric, was an exhibition that even the pseudo Piero—who had fought many times and bravely amid the terrors of a naval battle—felt a shiver in witnessing.

But for a timely dodge on Piero's part, the first strong sweep of the mighty ax would have completely severed his head; for Azhort, in his impulse of mad enthusiasm, seemed to forget the presence of his gondolier, and his position was near the box, within striking distance of that quite astonished person.

"Hough!" ejaculated Piero, as he rolled none too quick from the box and crouched upon the floor. "Now may the winged lion fly away with me from this den! An instant later, and my head would have been rolling under yonder table. Look at them! All mad! All devils! Were I ten times a giant, with the hide of a rhinoceros, I know that I never would leave this house alive did they discover me to be the lieutenant of famous Cladius Alburno."

"Dance, Tobato! Hoo! dance for joy!" screeched the hag.

"Hi! Hi!" squealed Tobato, louder than ever. The miniature pandemonium was only of a few seconds' duration.

"Silence, all!" snarled the hoarse voice of the deathsmen, abruptly slapping back the ax upon its brackets.

Instantly there was quietness. Tobato clambered again upon his high stool, and perceiving Piero kneeling and crouching, he giggled in amusement. Bal-Balla set about rearranging her hair and garments, disheveled and disorderly during the brief and vociferous orgie.

"Silence, all. I have more news to give you. This pillage and riot in prospect is to occur to-morrow night—"

"The sooner the better," put in Bal-Balla.

"Hi! To-morrow night. Good," supplemented Tobato.

"All Spaniards employed by nobles—and there are many—will attend to those nobles, saving all they can for the ax of Azhort and massacring all who cannot be saved. Ho! I am of the duke's party. Think of it: I will once again be chief executioner of Venice! though I desire it but for one day."

"Hoo! That is excellent! You will be chief!" applauded Bal-Balla.

"Hi! Hi! My father will be chief, and I shall have work in the strangling-chamber! Oil the bowstring! Sharpen sword and ax! Cheer for the Duke d'Ossuna! Hi!" and the impish dwarf swung his black-tight legs and long, slim arms, laughing loudly, and mother and son were on the verge of another frenzy; but Azhort sternly cried:

"Peace! Bolts and lightning! will you be still? Before this happens, remember that I must get into the Trienti palace, and see if I have not guessed aright the secret Lady Perci has held there for twelve years. 'Twas she who deprived you of your eye, Bal-Balla; she was fiery-tempered and scheming enough, eighteen years ago—to rush upon the deck and jab a lance-point at the first thing she saw; that chancing to be your eye; and she is cunning enough to contrive and carry out what I think she has for twelve years past. Vengeance for you and riches for me will ensue when I have laid bare the secret—a double secret—which must be accomplished before to-morrow night. Ha! fellow, do you understand what I am saying?" to Piero, whose presence he suddenly recalled.

Azhort was still using the language of Spain. Piero only stared and gaped, as if in dread of the man-fiend, and asked, tremblingly:

"What is your wish, signore?"

"Out! He is too much of an idiot to understand," avowed Bal-Balla, confidently, turning her leering one eye for a second on the dissembling Piero.

"Hi! they think him an idiot," chuckled Tobato, *sotto voce*; "but I know better. He is a man in disguise, with hair of two colors; and I begin to suspicion that the beard he wears is not on its rightful owner's face. Why is he masquerading here? I am watching him."

And Tobato was watching the supposed gondolier with the unwinking keenness of a rat that hides and waits for a chance to dart.

"But, how to enter Trienti palace?" was the query of Bal-Balla, "when for nearly the whole of those twelve years you have been striving vainly, and by every artifice, to gain admittance. Hoo! Marco Trienti is anything else than a friend of yours. And you have never told me what secret of hate lies between you."

"None," hissed Azhort, in a tone of anger, and scowling till his brows twisted in black knots over his hawkish nose. "None, except

that he despises bloodshed, and those who dabble in it, otherwise than in open warfare. But, despite the order of Marco Trienti, to the contrary, I shall enter the palace this very night. There is a purse of gold"—tossing onto the table the purse he had received in part payment from Lady Perci.

"Hoo! a purse of gold!" echoed the hag.

"Hi! gold! gold!" reechoed the dwarf imp.

Mother and son sprung greedily at the purse, tearing it apart and scattering its contents over the table top.

"That in part for having stabbed and drowned Cladius Alburno in the Grand Canal. I cannot be sure that I stabbed him, for, strangely, there is no blood on my knife. But he is drowned, to a certainty."

"So, I had forgotten," entered Piero's mind. "My beloved commander Captain Cladius, this very day put on a jacket of mail in fear of a knife-thrust from the skulking spies of The Ten. As he is a very good swimmer, he may be still alive to have his own vengeance on this man with a wolf's head."

"And," continued Azhort, "I am to get another purse at the palace, in completion of the bargain with Lady Perci, for it was to oblige her I did the deed. Have no doubt as to my being admitted. Look: this is the signet ring of Lady Perci Trienti. None dare dispute it!" and he held aloft the stolen ring that shone, in the light of the many candles that illuminated the room, like a sparkling star.

"The signet ring of Lady Perci!" exclaimed the two. And Bal-Balla: "I will not waste time to ask how you came by it, but—hoo!—by the power of that ring, then, you can find Venturi Adello, and from Venturi Adello you can learn where to seek for the chest of treasure we could not capture at a time when you and I bore other names, and in that fight on board the *Unita*, when Lady Perci speared my eye out. Hoo! Good! The treasure of Venturi Adello, first; then the head of Lady Perci!"

"What can they mean?" wondered the attentive Piero. "They speak of finding Venturi Adello, who, I have heard, was knocked overboard and drowned in the Adriatic, during a terrific battle against Sadrac, the half-Moor pirate, eighteen years ago. His dead body they must speak of. Come, how can the dead body—if it has been found—have anything to do with the discovery of a treasure? These beasts are mysterious as well as devilish!"

"Hi! Hi! money and vengeance! A good day's work for my smart father!" crowed Tobato, sidling again to his high stool, after having pocketed a goodly share of the coin from the purse.

"Hark ye," said Azhort, with a serious frown: "if Venturi Adello will deal with me, I will for once in my life do an honest deed. I will free him. We will share the treasure together. There are millions in precious stones for both. Ho! then for the pillage of Venice; and after the pillage, the sea!—the wide, free sea! The ship, the breeze, my hundred good men of Barbary, and Sadrac once more on the pirate's deck! Ha! ha! ha!"

"Hoo! And I—the Fazienta of old—with cutlass in hand, will be bravely at your side!"

"Hi! yes, the sea. A very good pirate I think I shall make," chimed in Tobato. "But I must have a bride. Give me Adria Trienti for my bride and queen, for I have long loved her!"

Tobato had no recollection of being on the sea; he was too young at a time when his parents lived entirely upon it and plied a nefarious trade, as will be developed duly.

"Very true," agreed the headsman, eying his son with tigerish pride. "It is a famous idea. Out of the pillage and massacre, I must try and save the pretty Adria to become the wife of my boy."

"Now, by the Pope's toe!" was the inward utterance of Piero. "What manner of riddle am I getting into? With half a brain I might judge that the notorious and outrageous Sadrac, the half-Moor pirate, and his wife, Fazienta, are before me in disguise. But Sadrac and his wife—who was accustomed to fight side by side with her husband—were both reported killed, I know, shortly after that very fight in which Venturi Adello, father of Adrio Adello, was drowned. It cannot be possible that either Venturi Adello, or Sadrac, or Sadrac's wife, are alive to-day. All have been lost sight of for too long. Yet they speak as if they were, and hope to be, pirates; and that young imp dares to think of abducting the beautiful Adria. Dog! How I should enjoy choking him to death!"

"Come, fellow, you shall take me first to the Trienti palace and return here for your supper. Come again to the palace when the iron hammer of Torre del'Orologio strikes twelve. Your name?—I had forgotten to ask you when I engaged you"—to Piero, as he replaced on his shoulders the rich black cape of velvet.

"Piero, your servant, signore," replied that person, humbly, making ready to depart.

Tobato was acting strangely and excitedly. The family trio had a system of chirology comprehensive only to themselves, and in that language the younger dwarf was striving to communicate something to his father. Bal-Balla

was busy with the dishes at the table and Azhort was adjusting his cap. Neither observed the motions of their son.

"Follow," commanded Azhort, striding from the apartment.

Piero kept close in the rear, and close and unnoticed by Piero noiselessly tiptoed and squirmed Tobato.

As the ex-chief of executioners laid his hand upon the outer door suddenly and swung it open with a jerk, a man, who had evidently been eavesdropping, nearly fell headlong inward.

"Guns and death! What is this?" he cried, bounding forward to grasp the spy.

But in the same instant Tobato sprung upon the back of Piero, tearing off the hat, wig and whiskers of the latter, and uttering a shrill yell.

"Hi! Look here! a man in disguise. A spy! A spy! Aid me, father!"

Piero twirled his assailant around and tripped him on the stones. Then, with a single leap, he dived forward into the water and vanished.

Startled by the outcry of his son, and while hesitating for a single instant, the first spy eluded Azhort, jumped into a two-prowed skiff and propelled himself like an arrow out upon the waters.

"Take the oar, Tobato! Haste! Two spies! What if all I have said has been understood by the spy inside and the spy outside! Fury of earth! Work about. If we can find the first, we may easily crack his skull as he swims. Haste!"

The listener at the outer door was the same vagabond who had, a short time previous, impounded Adrio Adello at the wharf on the Grand Canal to purchase his miserable-looking dog.

As the black gondola moved about over the now moonlighted waters, in search of Piero, the dull boom of a distant gun came to the ears of father and son.

"Ha! the voice of a *bombarde*," exclaimed Azhort. "I judge it comes from the fortress at Porto di Lido. No matter; it does not concern me. And since we cannot find that spy—death seize him!—why, on, on to the Trienti palace."

But that dull boom of the gun from Porto di Lido was of very great interest to Azhort, as subsequent events proved.

CHAPTER V.

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT.

THOUGH well beyond all danger from that collision on the Grand Canal consummated through the inhuman connivance of Lady Perci, the gondola containing Adria continued with unfaltering speed toward the curve, where, after running westward, the waters turn to an eastern course, the spot of the disaster happening at about that vicinity.

Feeling, by intuition, that a sudden and plotted peril menaced the man of her heart's adoration, her anxious face peered between the curtains, and straining eyes, sparkling with love and fear, were riveted upon the gondola of Cladius.

Behind and above her shoulders was another face, that of a faithful attendant, apparently of Indian extraction, frank of countenance and of muscular build. She had, as it were, reared and watched over Adria since the marriage of Lady Perci with Marco Trienti, twelve years previous.

Cladius, when covered with badges of fame, had twice visited the Trienti palace. Once—the first time—had sufficed to seal the destiny of two hearts upon the chance of happiness or misery enduring; for at the first moment of the meeting of their eyes, gaze to gaze, Cladius had said to himself:

"Here is my fate. Heaven has brought us together."

And Adria:

"This man is to be my king. I know not why, but already I love him."

Knowing Cladius Alburno to be an honorable man and a famous commander in the navy, and attracted, herself, by his noble bearing, the India-woman, Phla, had encouraged her young mistress in the amour thus singularly begun; for the two responsive hearts were not long in communicating their pure, passionate affection.

It was much owing to the artifice of Phla, who was a shrewd as well as devoted woman, that the clandestine meetings of the lovers were obtained, after the success of the vile plot conceived by Lady Perci, owing to which Cladius was proclaimed a traitor and outlaw by The Ten and sought for with bloodthirsty zeal by the spies of that silent, though stealthy and terrible Council.

Hence, Phla, with great interest, though not so deep nor as keen as Adria's, watched in suspense what she readily perceived—what both felt assured—was a premeditated assault upon Cladius Alburno.

"Oh, Phla! what can it mean? Know you that black gondola with a prow like flashing steel? I have often seen the same before now. See! It is almost on the other, which has scarce time to turn and meet bow to bow. Do you mark?"

"Ay, right well, Lady Adria, do I know it; and the bow is indeed steel, sharp steel, sharp as a knife. It is the gondola of that most horrible of men, Azhort, once chief executioner of Venice."

"Ah! that man of blood. Look, Phla!—look! They meet! They strike! They crash! Oh, Heaven have mercy! Cladius! Cladius!"

For just then the two boats collided, and Adria saw the angry leap of her lover, his brief struggle with a demon shape, the two furious stabs dealt with a blade that gleamed brightly in the setting sun—then Cladius fell and sunk from sight.

A shriek as agonizing as if the knife of Azhort had sheathed itself in her own bosom broke from her horrified lips, and with the shriek, and face whiter than the terraced landings around her, she drooped backward, insensible, into the quick arms of Phla.

"There, there, my poor lady!" moaned the woman, still in a shudder, herself, at what she had witnessed, and striving to restore Adria to consciousness. "Ah, me! what a death for so noble a warrior as Cladius Alburno. To die by the dagger of an assassin—and such an assassin! There, there, my dear, good babe, my Lady Adria, open your eyes to me, dear sweet. Look up. Well, it may not be that he is dead, after all."

"Claudius! Cladius!" murmured the now half-unconscious maiden.

"But he may not be dead. Nay, have hope. Straight to the palace and make all haste," she cried, to the gondolier.

When Adria regained her senses, it was not to wonder what had happened; everything had been too vividly imprinted on her mind to render question necessary—a mind that, nevertheless, dizzied and ached and found vent in weeping such only as flows from a wounded heart as it withers in the first great throes of insupportable grief.

"There, there, my dear lady," condoled Phla, caressing the sobbing form that lay in her strong and affectionate arms. "Do not yet grieve for what may appear to be the death of the right noble man who was your worthy lover. I cannot think that a just Heaven would permit such as he to perish so miserably. Cheer, my dear lady. Have hope."

"Oh, Phla! would that it had been me instead! I would gladly have given my own life for Cladius!" gasped the lips that were buried and sobbing on Phla's shoulder.

"Well enough I know that, Lady Adria. But, be not too sure that Cladius Alburno is dead. Wait. If dead, his body will surely be found when it is noised publicly that the traitor, Cladius, was stabbed and drowned in the Grand Canal by Azhort, ex-chief of executioners of Venice. Wait, then, until we hear such rumor. Be guided by your ever-faithful Phla. Take respite. Compose yourself, I beg, dear lady, until we reach the palace."

Arriving at the palace, Phla hurried her young mistress to her private apartments.

Adria, though at last outwardly composed, acted like one in a labyrinth who walks mechanically, tired and hopeless, with little reck of whither the end may be.

Alone together Phla evinced most serious concern for her precious charge.

"Some refreshment immediately for my dear lady. You are weak. Eat something. Let me change your attire"—it was anything to divert the thoughts of Adria. "Ah, me! those cheeks, that always blushed soft and rich as the roses of the garden, need a little—just a little—touch of rouge. No? Well, then, eat, my dear lady. Here is sparkling wine and ripe, sweet fruit and other tempting things. A taste, a bite, a sip—it will stir the blood."

But Adria waved the repast aside and sat, with clasped hands, a very picture of despair, dreaming—a frightful dream—of that glistening blade in a demon hand which had stricken Cladius Alburno.

Phla contemplated her sorrowfully, at a loss how to act.

"Ah! my poor babe, my poor Lady Adria," she murmured, her honest eyes filling with tears. "May all the evil spirits under the earth wreak unending torment on the ugly wretch who has given my mistress this overpowering fright. Yes, a fright—only a fright, for I do not yet believe that noble Cladius Alburno can have died by the hand of that assassin."

Here there was a summons at the entrance, and Phla, answering it, returned to say:

"Marco Trienti, your step-father, wishes to see you, Lady Adria. Come, let me arrange your toilet befitting a meeting with him."

"Be expeditious, Phla, for I am anxious to be with him. Though a step-father, he has ever been a father to me, and my love has gone out to him as a daughter's."

"Marco Trienti is a good man, heart and deed," observed Phla, busying herself with the toilet. "Would that I could think the same of his wife."

"Hush, Phla. Remember—she is my mother."

"And," was the woman's mental comment, "a very unmotherly mother, I vow, if she

is your mother, which I have doubted for some years." But she kept this thought behind her lips.

The toilet completed, they descended the broad staircase together. Phla had many privileges, owing to her long and faithful service in the household, and in her plain though tidy costume had nearly always remained close to her young mistress, even when the large saloons and corridors were wont to blaze and swim with the light and dazzle of gay entertainments or masquerade, for which the Trienti palace was noted.

Half-way down they met a page ascending.

"Can you tell me whether Lady Perci has returned?" he inquired.

"As well ask me how long since Lady Perci left the palace," was the sharp, unsatisfactory response of the India-woman. "I am not the keeper of Lady Perci, boy, but the willing slave of Lady Adria."

"Phla, do not be rude," admonished Adria, gently; and she asked, scarce able to account for the impulse: "Tell me, Fauco, who has come?"

"Azhort, the ex-chief of executioners. He desires an interview with Lady Perci, and cannot be refused because he wears her signet-ring."

At the first announcement, Adria tottered and grasped the balustrade for support, while her large, wondrous, startled eyes followed the page as he continued to ascend the staircase after answering her question.

"Azhort, the headsman! He in the palace!" she gasped. "No!—no! it is scarce possible. What could bring *him* here, and with the signet-ring of my mother? The murderer of my—Come, Phla! Oh, haste! I shall not feel safe until I am with Marco Trienti, my father."

Fresh life seemed suddenly to possess the maiden, making her fleet of foot, and for the moment flushing cheek and brow. Together they hastened to the apartment where the senator awaited the coming of his step-child; and as they entered his presence, Phla cried out in a spirited tone:

"Hear, Marco Trienti! The horrible man, Azhort, ex-headsman of Venice, is in the palace, when it is well known that you have forbidden his entrance. He is at this moment awaiting an audience with Lady Perci!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRIENTI PALACE.

The palace of the senator was situated on the Isle Murano.

Murano had its own Grand Canal—not so long but equally as lively, brilliant and beautifully bordered as that of Venice, the seat of government.

Many of the wealthiest families, nobles and members of the Grand Council, resided on the Isle Murano, and its magnificent palaces and manufactories, at the date of this romance, after wars, revolts, bombardments and conflagrations, were lingering and dazzling monuments of proverbial grandeur, and the admiration of the world.

Very close to the southern entrance to the Grand Canal of Murano stood the palace of Marco Trienti, rearing its massive blocks of marble, kaleidoscope of frescoes, cornices of quaint device and lofty balconies, like an enchanted and incomparable production of genii, arresting the eyes with its imposing architecture, and delighting the sense with the giddy wealth of its interior.

Polished steps, that lay to and beneath the water's edge, terminated at a landing of tessellated flags; thence, and to one side, to a broad, stone-balustraded ascent dotted with statuary and gilded urns. At the top an open porch with bulky columns and embowering roof; and as if the palace was but a portal to some suddenly discovered paradise, the open and extensive porchway, of marble, monogram and harmonizing effects, presented numerous accesses to the palace and to the garden beyond, where all that ever bloomed to intoxicate with perfumes of pleasure, or entice with poetic loveliness, burst upon the vision of the already expectant beholder.

At the front and very top of the palace, a small, round hole was observable, its excessive light and the inward shadow of the orifice, when the sun passed to the West, giving it rather the appearance of a mere dark spot, that might have been about eighteen inches in diameter.

Any one at the inside of this hole could gaze, as through an immovable telescope—because of its smallness and the thickness of the wall—over the buildings on the opposite side of the canal, upon the isles of the east, and the "Deathsman's Fort," toward Porto di Lido and the deep sea beyond, covered incessantly with skimming vessels.

But no one, as yet—or of later years—knew the meaning of that hole being placed there, removed from and higher than the highest windows, and for generations it had been supposed to be some inexplicable method of ventilation conceived by an eccentric architect. After numerous unsuccessful attempts by the curious to reach it interiorly—for, upon gaining the point

where it ought to be on the inside, nothing was encountered but solid masonry—conjecture ceased and the mystery of the hole remained a mystery.

In saying that no one could divine the purpose of that very small and deep opening, high up, and in the front wall of the Trienti palace, two exceptions are to be made.

On the day that Lady Perci became the bride of Rupert Riali, her first husband, that distinguished man of fortune had, at an enormous expense, purchased the gorgeous home as a wedding gift for the woman of his choice. The party selling—and who died shortly subsequent—had acquainted Riali with the secret of the hole in the wall—for a very great secret it was—and he, in turn, confided the information to his wife. Together they explored and acquainted themselves with the mystery.

Within the upper wall of the palace there was another, a false and thick wall, and between the two walls a stone-bound chamber, eight feet wide by fifteen feet long—a veritable prison-cell. In the center was a round, smooth column, and directly opposite the column the small, deep-opening or port-hole, that served as a window for light and ventilation, with a thick glass adjustable inclosure at the inner part.

This secret chamber was accessible by a narrow passage leading upward from a certain apartment beneath—known for generations past as the "red room." The entrance to the passage was by a movable mirror in the lower apartment, thence passing two iron doors and arriving at a third, the last door, of even heavier frame and having an iron grating.

Between the secret chamber and the lower apartment there was a skillfully constructed and invisible tube, its utility somewhat similar to what the modern professor, Hughes, perfected in the nineteenth century as the microphone. By this tube, which could be opened or shut at pleasure, anything transpiring in the upper chamber was distinctly audible below.

When Lady Perci had noted all, she thought:

"What an admirable prison for some husband, if wanted out of the way by his wife—or anybody else that may happen in one's path. Let me remember the convenience of this place should occasion arise." And her evil mind began from that moment to balance the consequences of the sudden disappearance of her own husband.

Though a very handsome woman in her younger days, and popular with all who knew her, Lady Perci had inherited a nature for plots and covetous ambition culminating with after experiences in a most unscrupulous disposition, beginning with false vows to Rupert Riali whom she had married solely for his vast wealth.

Riali and his bride went abroad to visit several mines of gold and precious stones in which he was extensively interested, and he never returned to Venice—Lady Perci surviving to gain possession of everything and to wed, for the second time, six years later, with Marco Trienti, afterward a senator, and descended from those nobles who, owing to the various summer-sets of the Republic, had inherited nothing from his ancestors but an honorable escutcheon.

A sister of Marco Trienti's had married a wealthy trader named Venturi Adello. Both families, the Rialis and the Adellos, were intimate and abroad together at the time when Venturi Adello was supposed to have met his death, and when Rupert Riali and Lady Anice Adello were, beyond all doubt, killed outright and buried in the sea, the circumstances of which are to be shown hereafter.

When Lady Perci, in a garb of widowhood, reached Venice, she had with her two children: Adio, whom she sent to Marco Trienti as the son of his sister, and Adria, whom she announced as her own child. Adio was then five years old—Adria four.

Events which transpired before, and at the immediate time, and after the time of Lady Perci's second marriage, caused her to fix her resolve upon the union of Adio and Adria—and these events, to be explained in the progress of the story, formed a most important plot in the lives of Lady Perci and all the characters so far introduced to the reader.

The present interest lies, however, in the palace at the moment when the attending woman, Phla, in company with Adria, burst upon Marco Trienti with the startling speech:

"Hear! The horrible man, Azhort, ex-chief headsman of Venice, is in the palace, when it is well known that you have forbidden his entrance. He is at this moment awaiting an audience with Lady Perci!"

The senator was alone. He was in a very thoughtful mood, and a cross frown of annoyance wrinkled his usually calm and pleasant face—pleasant, because Phla was right in saying that Marco Trienti was a good man in heart and deed, and the faces of such men generally bear the open stamp of their nature.

Though, according to code, the members of the Council of Ten were known to none, and scarcely to themselves, as they were always masked when at meeting, it is our privilege to inform that Marco Trienti was one of the terrible Ten—much against inclination—and the

Azhort, the Axman.

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cause of his excessive uneasiness on this night was owing to certain fresh disclosures and betrayals made to and through the emissaries of The Ten by Jacques Pierre, formerly a noted corsair, then figuring privately in Venice and secretly in the employ of the Duke d'Ossuna in that historical plot for the pillage of the capital.

When D'Ossuna, De Bedmar, and Dom Pedro de Toledo—the three chief conspirators—discovered that their scheme was likely to be known to The Ten, such cunning diplomacy was put forth as even hoodwinked The Ten and caused that body to believe that a revolt at Naples was the actual depth, width and substance of their intentions; and so clever were the plotters that the Government had gone so far as to promise aid to D'Ossuna in securing the crown of Naples.

But Jacques Pierre, considering himself badly paid and in many ways slighted by his superiors, had betrayed, that very day, the true object of the conspiracy, implicating the duke, the ambassador and the Governor of Milan beyond all doubt as to their guiltiness and deceit.

This unreliable villain was afterward hung ignominiously in the square of St. Mark.

But the information conveyed to The Ten, late on this day, through the many agents of the Council, was now vexing the brain of Marco Trienti as with a nightmare, though stealthy steps were being taken to meet and suppress the anticipated outbreak.

"Why should I harass myself more with it," he exclaimed, "when all has been attended to in view of it. The roll of a drum—a bugle blast—will swarm the canals and streets with military. Pah! let me banish it. Yet, I have much to do this night, much to watch, or Venice is, at last, lost forever. Traitors! Conspirators! Life or property does not stand in the way of such men! Ha! what means that? There is no cause for such a sound to-night. Had it been to-morrow night, I would have said: 'The riot has commenced, and that is the death-knell for the enemies of Venice!'

For it was then that the report of a heavy cannon or *bombarde* rumbled dully on the air, coming from the direction of Porto di Lido—the same sound heard by the evil Azhort and his evil son, Tobato, as they gave up their search for Piero in the water before the "deathsmen's fort," and turned the prow of the black gondola toward the Trienti palace.

Shortly succeeding this moment, and having determined to no more strain his mind upon, but calmly await the development of those secret and well-laid plans intended for the discomfiture of the conspirators, he dispatched a page requesting the society of Adria, to whom he was warmly attached, and in whose wonted sunny presence he often buried and lost sight of, for a time, the many troubles of his official career.

"I will talk with her, if but for a few moments," he mused, walking back and forth. "I ever feel, when she has been with me, a fresher, more vigorous reason and a quicker keenness for my duties. It is like a drift of golden light through clouds of chaos. Bless the child! this home would be no home at all without her; and in my selfishness, I could almost be glad that Cladius Alburno, because he was proved a traitor, has no longer a chance to wed and take her from me. Adria first, and a kiss from her angel lips; then for a battle, with art and weapon, against the internal foes of Venice!"

Imagine, then, his astonishment when, simultaneously with the appearance of the maiden, in glad obedience to his summons, came the excited words of the India-woman who was with her.

"Hear! The horrible man, Azhort, ex-chief headsman of Venice, is in the palace, when it is well known that you have forbidden his entrance. He is, at this moment, awaiting an audience with Lady Perci!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE SIGNET RING OF LADY PERCI.

MARCO TRIENTI paused short in his turbid striding, and looked at the attending woman in amazement and incredulity, doubting whether he heard aright or whether she might be crazed—for so strict had been his orders regarding the debarkment, under all possible circumstances, of the deathsman, that the presence of that personage seemed beyond belief.

It was not until Phla had repeated almost the exact words several times that he fully appreciated the gravity of her speech.

"What has come over you, woman?" he demanded. "Have you been dreaming crooked dreams?—and try to frighten Lady Adria, or others of the household, with such an absurd—" "Nay, dear father"—Adria was accustomed, in her affection, to address him thus—"Phla speaks indeed truly, Azhort is here."

"Nonsense. Why the guard would not dare—"

"Oh, but the wretch-of-a-deathsman wears the signet ring of Lady Perci, and guard nor servant would think of disputing it as a passport," declared Phla, stoutly.

"Believe us, father, that man of dread is at this moment in the palace. Oh, I can feel his

very presence in my veins! I implore you, have him sent away at once."

Astounded, angry, yet scarce able to believe that Azhort, the man-fiend, could possibly have gained admittance to the palace unchallenged, Marco Trienti hurried forth to the broad, luxurious hall. He encountered the same page, Fausto, who had accosted Adria and Phla on the grand staircase.

"I am seeking Lady Perci," said the youth. "Can you tell me where to look for her?"

"Ha! you are 'seeking Lady Perci.' Come, now, what is your business with her?"

"To announce that Azhort, the ex-chief of executioners, desires an immediate and private interview."

"Thou knave! This to my face!—when I had forbidden that Azhort should ever set foot here? But you are lying!"

"Nay, the very truth. But for the signet ring, which Azhort wore and showed—the well-known ring of Lady Perci—he could not have entered," protested the page, as he writhed in a sudden and painful grasp which Marco Trienti laid upon his arm, and alarmed at the passion of his master—for though of nature mild and habit serene, he could be stern, severe and dangerously tempered.

"Where is he? Lead me to him. He can have nothing in common with my wife—beast! It is for me to deal with him—hideous and insolent butcher!"

"I left him there," returned Fausto, pointing to and starting toward the curtained entrance of a small room or alcove generally used for the reception of strange visitors.

But when the curtains were dragged aside—and much to the surprise of Fausto, who was perfectly confident of having left Azhort in waiting there—the apartment was found to be empty.

"See!—you have dreamed all this, Fausto."

"As I am a living mortal, I showed him hither and he promised to abide my return," vowed the confused page. "Perhaps he is in here"—indicating another room.

But the second room, like the first, contained no one. If Azhort had been in either room, he was now mysteriously gone.

The fact that Phla, and Adria, and Fausto, the page, had successively and so very earnestly avowed that Azhort, the deathsman, was on the premises, at last deeply impressed Trienti, who now believed that that personage must indeed be somewhere near and in concealment.

"Search the palace!" he cried, loud enough to be heard from end to end of the spacious hall. "Look for Azhort, the headsman! He is here! Find him and bring him to me at all hazards."

With this quick order, and frowning darkly—while an instant commotion of pattering footsteps and excited voices prevailed—he strode forward to the guard at the first and chief entrance of the portico.

This guard, a powerful, black-bearded soldier, with a long-hafted lance, was armed like a veritable crusader—helmet, habergeon and gloves with knuckles of steel. At a particular period when conspiracies and rumors of conspiracies endangered the lives of public men, the Trienti palace, like many others, was provided with a small guard of soldiery—especially since the Council of Ten was gradually undecieving itself as to the hitherto seeming plausibilities of D'Ossuna, set forth originally and afterward exploded by his two most efficient agents and wire-pullers, Jacques Pierre and Antoine Jaffier.

The senator went straight and angrily to this man.

"What is this?" he asked, crossly. "Have you admitted the vulture, Azhort?"

"I have passed the signet ring of Lady Perci, which Azhort wore," replied the soldier, saluting respectfully, and rigid in attention."

"The signet ring of Lady Perci!" kept ringing in Trienti's ears and mumbling on his lips. "What, in the names of the Saints, can it signify? How could such as Azhort obtain a ring—her signet ring—from my wife? What could possibly be between them?"

"Here is Lady Perci herself," ventured the soldier, as she and Adio appeared at that juncture upon the scene, and right glad of the opportunity to escape further questioning as to the responsibility of having admitted Azhort against positive orders for his exclusion.

Lady Perci had not immediately returned to the palace after the scene on the Grand Canal. Glowing and elated at what had transpired through her murderous management, she desired a short space in which to thoroughly compose herself, besides indulging Adio with fresh encouragement since no further rivalry was to be apprehended from Cladius Alburno.

Some considerable time elapsed ere the vicious woman and her now determinedly designing protégé put in an appearance.

Both she and Adio paused in surprise at the prevailing commotion as at a sign of ominous excitement—for the loud orders of the aroused senator were being filled promptly and with chattering enthusiasm by the servitors generally and four more soldiers attracted, by the sound of bustle and sudden alarm, from the temporary guard-room at the extreme rear and lower section of the palace.

The two paused between Marco Trienti and the guard, as the former spoke, half furiously, upon the instant he beheld his wife:

"Well, madam, explain. The detestable villain, Azhort, ex-headsman of Venice, has entered the palace against my orders, with your ring—a signet—as a passport, and to dare request an interview with you. Come, what is its purport—all?"

Lady Perci looked at him in unfeigned astonishment.

"Azhort? My signet ring?" she exclaimed, with elevated brows.

But Lady Perci was ever alert. No sooner had mention of one of her rings come from her husband's lips than both of her hands, partially concealed before in the folds of her rich costume, glided cautiously behind her, and quick as a flash she slipped off every ring she wore, clasping all tightly in one palm.

"Ay, answer," pursued Trienti. "Here, with your signet ring and to see you—privately, was his message."

"Have you dared to admit that wretch?" she demanded, addressing the guard with assumed passion.

As she asked this, and half turned toward the straight and statue-like guardsman, she deftly slipped the rings into the deep inner pocket of her costly mantle.

"I would not have passed Azhort; I knew and obeyed the signet ring of Lady Perci," was the brief answer.

"This idiot is either drunk or he is a brazen falsifier!" asserted Lady Perci, leveling and shaking a forefinger at the immobile guardsman. "Do you think that I would have aught to do with such as Azhort?—that I would, under any circumstances whatever, give him a ring?—have the palace polluted by his presence? And if so, how possible this day, when, by an oversight, I went away without a single ring upon my fingers?" And with the last she held aloft both hands, bare of all ornament, at the same time giving Adio a swift, meaning glance unnoticeable to the others owing to a slight turn of her proud head, and which that person readily translated.

"On my honor, I do not recollect having seen any rings on the hands of Lady Perci this day," avowed Adio; which was partly truthful, for had he noticed them, his mind had been so occupied with the recent occurrences on the Grand Canal, in which he had been deeply though involuntarily interested, that he could not now have said, on oath, whether Lady Perci had or had not worn any rings that afternoon.

"Come, Adio, a word with you," requested Lady Perci, as if disdaining to mix further in the surrounding commotion or have more to say upon the topic of the seemingly impossible presence of the deathsman.

She swept haughtily past her husband and ascended the staircase, Adio accompanying her.

Marco Trienti, in a very bewildered state, returned in thoughtful silence to the apartment where he had left Adria and Phla.

"Am I crazy?—dreaming?—or is every one else so?" was the perplexing question within him. "Well, we shall see when the search is ended."

"Adio," whispered Lady Perci, as they went up side by side, "it seems to be true that the man, Azhort, has obtained possession of my most precious ring, a gift from one of the wealthiest owners of one of those rich mines in which, I have before told you, my first husband held large interests. Already I miss it. The light-fingered ghoul must have adroitly possessed himself of it in the brief second in which I handed him the purse of gold in part payment for the assassination of Cladius Alburno—nay, do not start; it was no less. And all for your sake, Adio, whom I love so dearly—darling boy!"—and having reached a landing at the top of the staircase, and as they turned and moved beyond the gaze of those in the hall below, she threw her arms around his neck in a quick, impulsive, ardent embrace and kissed him passionately twice or thrice. "Ay, for your sake, Adio; remember that. But it is quite likely that Azhort is in the palace. He has come for the balance of his pay—nothing more, I am sure. Marco Trienti must not see him. Hasten you and find him, Adio. Bring him to me in the red room. And charge the servants, on their lives, to say nothing. There, now, go."

Kissing him twice or thrice again, she pushed him from her and continued upward, while Adio descended to the hall, intending to carry out her wishes. Lady Perci smiled gloriously as she muttered:

"If Azhort is here—and I believe he is, because he has stolen my ring, and by its potency dares to come for the balance of his pay—and if I can get him into the red room, I will serve him as I served Barban, the chain forger. Aha! it will be the last night in the life of the bloody headsman. Yes, he shall meet the same fate as Barban. Ha! ha! ha!"

The guardsman at the entrance stood erect and motionless, with rigid neck and eyes fixed on vacancy. Once out of those eyes, half shielded by his spiked and plumed helmet, he stole a sly glance at the departing figures of Marco Trienti, Lady Perci and Adio.

"May I die in the strangling chamber or torture cell, if I did not see a round dozen of rings on that woman's fingers when she first came in?" he growled, to himself. "First—I see them—then by magic they disappear. She is deceiving her husband. And I am now not only sure that I admitte Sir Azhort, but I believe, also, that he com's by actual appointment with the wizard-handed Lady Perci."

"Then, friend Giaco, why do you not so inform the senator?—for I will swear that I ushered the deathsmen into yonder alcove."

The speaker was the page, Fauchon, who stood almost at the elbow of the guardsman and close enough to catch his low-mumbled words.

"Because I am a soldier—not a spy," was the gruff response.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EYES IN THE PICTURE.

WHILE Adria and the serving-woman stood, arm in arm, awaiting the return of Marco Trienti, and listened, with bated breath, to the commotion in the hall without—for the arched gothic entrance had no bar save thick and superbly-draping curtains—they presently heard that sudden and additional disturbance of patterning feet and humming, mumbling voices in gabble and call, which ensued immediately upon the sharp orders given by the senator for the search and capture of Azhort.

"Oh, Phla! did you hear what my father said? To bring him to him. What might he—my father—be capable of doing? I have never known him in a rage; to me, he has shown a nature molded wholly in kindness, and I know that such are the worst when at last awakened to anger. And already they must have found the headsman, judging by that noise. I shudder to think what may follow."

"May they smite off his ugly head, or pin his crooked body with a dozen lances!" was the prompt wish of the India-woman, her black eyes sparkling with the abomination she felt for Azhort. "But here is your good father; and I hope he may say that they have captured and cut to pieces the vile rogue of a headsman!"

Trienti at that moment reentered the apartment, pushing aside the curtains impatiently and with a deep, studious frown upon his brow, while his hands worked nervously palm over palm.

"By my hopes!" he was muttering, scarce audibly. "I hardly know what to think. Adria, whom I love; Phla, whom I think I can trust; a tried soldier, who could have no object in lying upon so serious a matter; all say that Azhort came here wearing, as a passport, the signet-ring of Lady Perci. Why should she deceive me?—if she has. 'Tis all very strange."

But Marco Trienti had yet to learn that the whole life of the woman to whom he had been bound for twelve years was one fearful page of deceit, treachery, intrigue and unscrupulous ambition.

"Dear father, have they found him?" cried Adria.

"Ah! Adria, my child. Leave us, Phla." And as the India-woman withdrew: "No. But if he is here, rest assured he will be quickly discovered. I will send him from the palace in such a manner that he will not, methinks, have an inclination to repeat the impudent visit. Come and sit by me, Adria. I have a short while to spare, and it has ever seemed to me that no one in the world has cared for me with love like yours."

He threw himself into a comfortable seat. Adria sunk upon a low cushion beside him, burying her face in her hands and drooping her head to his knee.

There was a moment's silence. Trienti contemplated her in surprise. What could all his pet, his almost child? Her presence had always been like sunshine, full of smiles and merry glances; now, in the deep dejection which again possessed her, she looked and acted the picture of a stricken lily. He stretched forth and rested one hand gently on the opulent and glorious tresses.

"Why, Adria! And you are weeping! What has befallen you, child?"

"Oh! it is for Cladius—Cladius, who is lost to me forever."

"Claudius Alburno!" again the clouding frown knitted Trienti's brow, though his voice was mild. "He was proved to be a traitor."

"Do you believe it of him?" she asked, gazing up and steadfast into his face. "Oh! can you, who are so good, so just, believe that Cladius was aught but nobleness, truth, fidelity, bravery itself?"

There was a magnetism in the wondrous, hopeful orbs that seemed to seize upon the very heart of Marco Trienti.

A brief pause. The gaze of the two remained fixed, and presently a single tear started from the strong man's eyes. His face grew pale. But it was not the maiden's question that caused the tear and pallor.

"Adria, I have often seen a strange resemblance in your face to one who was very dear to me many, many years ago. With those

tear-stained cheeks and eager, hopeful, yearning eyes you seem to me like a vision of her on that fright-winded night when she was washed from my side by waves lashing mountain high—she and our babe—to struggle, to sink and perish, while I was powerless to aid her. Oh! when I think of it—and here an overpowering emotion, caused by a momentary recall of some sad scene in the past ended his speech with a choking gulp.

"Dear father, can it be possible that you were married before you met Lady Perci, my mother?"

"Yes—yes; and it is because I sometimes see in you a transient image of one who once loved me with her whole soul, that my heart has gone out to you from the first, child, as if you were indeed my own, the same babe who perished with its mother in wind and storm upon the raging sea, when the stroke of the tempest wrecked the ill-fated ship Giorga. You are singularly like her—the pure and dark-eyed lady, I mean; more so to-night than ever before. Never speak of this, Adria, even to me. It is dead and locked forever here, a buried secret, for none knew that we were wed save the officers and crew of the unfortunate Giorga"—he tapped his left breast solemnly. "But you were speaking of Cladius Alburno. Come, you have told me many times how you loved him, and I would be sorry, for your sake, at such a termination of his career. I thought that since he was proved to be a traitor even you had set aside all love for the man?"

"Whatever he may be, he is still my Cladius, whom I adore. Who were his accusers?"

"His very self the worst accuser—he fled. When Cladius Alburno left port to wage a war of extermination upon the pirates of the Adriatic and beyond the Adriatic, his sealed instructions were to spare none. What did he do? We received information—we?—hist!—Adria"—in a whisper, and glancing uneasily about him—"do not recollect that I said 'we.' I mean the Council of Ten received appraisal that, having crippled and captured a pirateship, Cladius Alburno paroled and allowed to escape to Sicily no less than eighty outlaws. And to fix his guilt beyond all question, he fled, no one knows whither. Disobedience is treason. He would not face honorable trial."

The maiden's eyes were still riveted on the face of the man she loved, the man who had, indeed, been a father to her for twelve years, as she again questioned:

"Who were his accusers? Would the terrible Ten condemn upon an anonymous charge? Oh, my father! think of Cladius, covered with the glory of renown in the service of Venice—the battles he has won and the honors he has merited. Traitors do not gain all these, to be crushed finally and easily by anonymous enemies. The enemies of Cladius may have been too strong for him to meet at once in open trial; his flight may but have been to gain time in which to prove to you and to all Venice that Cladius Alburno is a true patriot and warrior. Besides, it is well known that few people tried in the Ducal Palace escape that fearful walk across the bridge whose path shuts them forever from the world. But, ah! what am I saying? Why do I go on thus, when Cladius is dead—dead and lost to me?"

Marco Trienti half-started from his seat on hearing these last words.

"What is that? You say Cladius Alburno is dead?"

"Ay, dead!—the only man, next to you, my more than father, for whom my heart has ever felt one touch of love."

"Child!—what mean you?"

"Oh! but I saw it all; it is set in my mind like a brand of fire. We met to-day—forgive me, but it was my love for him. We parted. And then—and then I saw him stabbed and slain. He tottered! He sunk!—sunk to his death in the Grand Canal. Merciful Heaven! I almost feel as if I were going mad!"

"Claudius Alburno slain! By whom?"

"By Azhort, the headsman—"

"Azhort!"

As Adria named the man she believed to be the murderer of her lover, and as Marco Trienti echoed that name in amaze, her dizzy glance chanced to turn upon a large picture—one of many pictures ornamenting the apartment—which had hung there through many years as the portrait of Rupert Riali, Lady Perci's first husband, as he looked at the date of his marriage with her. This picture did not hang from, but was imbedded in the wall.

And as she gazed, and though other words were on her lips, the lips turned bloodless and her beautiful eyes dilated in sudden horror.

The eyes of the picture were not now painted eyes, but human, blinking, glaring and ferocious eyes that glowered steadily upon the two occupants of the room.

There were no other such malevolent eyes in all Venice—the eyes of Azhort, which, as before mentioned, were a shuddering theme among the populace—and those same orbs now glistened and stared forth from the portrait of Rupert Riali.

For a second, petrified and speechless, as if charmed by some deadly mesmerism—then Adria

struggled up from the cushion, throwing her arms giddily aloft, and shrieked:

"His eyes! I see his eyes! The eyes of Azhort, who murdered my Cladius!"

Marco Trienti, alarmed at the strange behavior of the maiden, and who was simultaneously upon his feet, was barely in time to catch and support her half-fainting form.

CHAPTER IX.

THE VOICE IN THE RED ROOM.

The shriek of affright that burst from Adria was heard by the India-woman, who had not gone further than the outside of the curtained entrance. She immediately came running in.

"What can have happened to my darling mistress?" she cried, hastening to relieve Trienti of the limp and hardly sensible form.

"Heaven alone knows," said the senator, very gravely, while Phla endeavored to revive the maiden from a semblance of nervous and alarming stupor.

"His eyes! His eyes!" aspirated the quivering lips. "The eyes of Azhort! Oh, those horrible eyes! They were looking at me from there—there, in the picture!" and partly recovering her strength, she pointed to the portrait of Rupert Riali, as if expecting her gaze to encounter again the shuddering, basilisk orbs of the headsman.

Trienti and the India-woman bestowed a momentary glance upon the massive and imbedded picture, and, though seriously concerned for Adria's condition, they could but smile at the seemingly ridiculous idea of any human eyes having peered from the painted eyes of the portrait.

Adria had frequently seen the person, the fearful eyes, and once heard the sullen, guttural voice of Azhort on the Grand Canal, though invisible herself within the coverings of her own gondola. The eyes of the headsman, once met with, were never to be forgotten. She was confident there could be no mistake, no hallucination; those same eyes had glared upon her from the portrait of Lady Perci's first husband. Now they had vanished.

"My poor, unnerved child," soothed Marco Trienti. "It is but a disagreeable phantasy. Your thoughts have been set and absorbed upon the unfortunate young man, Cladius Alburno—we were speaking of him. I can imagine how easily, in great grief, after the assassin's deed you have told me of, your overburdened mind could see, or seem to see, distracting visions—"

"Oh, but I am sure!" exclaimed the maiden. "There are no eyes like Azhort's. They looked at me, flashed at me, and then—no, I am not mad, yet how my brain throbs—terrible though they always are, they turned to two dots of living flame and burned themselves to darkness. Am I to be haunted by the man who murdered Cladius?"

She buried her face in her hands and sobbed aloud.

"There, my dear babe, my precious Lady Adria," spoke Phla, gently, as she tightly embraced the trembling frame—while Marco Trienti shook his head in a sad way, for he had begun to think that if what Adria had told him was true, that Cladius had been slain by the headsman, her deep grieving had affected her reason. "Nay, you must be mistaken, dreaming, anything. I have heard, without, that after complete search from roof to foundation, nothing can be found of the wretch, Azhort, so he cannot be here at all; and even I begin to think that Fauchon lied, that it was a thoughtless trick, though for what cruel purpose it is impossible to conceive. Ah! my master, my dear Lady Adria has good cause to dread the very name of Azhort—"

"She has told me all."

"But, then, it was only a trick of Fauchon's. We shall rate him soundly, shall we not?"—with a wink to the senator. "There, do not weep. Come with me. Let me mix you a soothing draught. Ha! here is Fauchon. Thou villainous Fauchon!—to have nearly frightened the wits out of my Lady Adria, by an infamous lie about the presence of Azhort."

Fauchon had appeared almost noiselessly, and halted in surprise at the singular tableau before him.

"Now that hag calls me liar. It has been 'knave,' 'dog,' 'wretch,' for some time—now it is 'liar.' No matter; I shall have the satisfaction of wringing her neck or seeing it wrung, to-night, when the iron hammer of Torre del Orologio strikes twelve!" And aloud the page announced, bowing respectfully: "A message for the Lady Adria."

"Well?" inquired the maiden, lowly, and checking her tears.

"Lady Perci wishes to see you, alone, in the red room."

"The red room!" repeated all, in astonishment.

For during twelve years—ever since the day of her marriage with Marco Trienti—what had been known as the red room was ever held sacredly private by Lady Perci. Not one of the present household had ever been inside of it, except Adria, in her childhood and before the second marriage of her mother, and then only once.

To all there had ever existed a mysterious something, unnameable and unquestioned, in connection with Lady Perci's exclusive and unapproachable red room. The message, therefore, that Lady Perci desired an interview with her daughter alone and in that room, naturally created much and general wonder.

"Say to her that I will attend," requested Adria; and as Fauco withdrew: "Come, Phla, go with me as far as the door of the red room. I am weak and need your support. I—" she caught the sober, pitying glance of Marco Trienti, who still contemplated her in a manner that plainly meant:

"God have mercy upon my sweet Adria and give her strength, for I feel that the death of Cladius Alburno has robbed her of her reason. Poor child—and she was once so light-spirited and gay."

"Oh, my father!"

Adria threw herself into his arms, remaining a moment enfolded by one who, equally though differently from Cladius, felt that his life was wrapt in this one being so pure and beautiful.

"There, Adria, good-night"—with a tender kiss; "your mother awaits you."

Lady Perci was seated alone in that room beyond the entrance of which no one but herself had passed for twelve years.

It was a sumptuous apartment on the higher floor of the palace, furnished in a taste and richness exceeding the power of description, and reflecting from numerous colossal mirrors, over a score of lights from chandelier, brackets and candelabras, till the illumination had redoubled splendor—every wick and flame ignited by the hand of Lady Perci.

Every atom of dust, every vestige of disorder was effaced alone by her; whatever refreshment at any time brought or removed was delivered and received back at the door of Lady Perci's red room—a room in which everything, in accord with its title, was hued, upholstered and painted like a dye of blood itself.

On the red-legged table of crimson cloth was set a large tray of fruit, cake and wine. Lady Perci was eating of the cake, but the cake she held had not come from any of the silver dishes before her. She nibbled and picked at it like one who does so merely for appearance sake.

Adio had rapped at the door to inform her that Azhort was not to be found in the palace.

"So much the better," she muttered, when he had received her excuses and departed. "The fool—Azhort—saw his error in coming here, and, being alarmed at the anger of my husband, which he no doubt witnessed from some nook of hiding, has slipped away unperceived. What a clever thief the fellow must be, to get my ring in the single second when I handed him the purse, for never before in my life was I near enough to Azhort to permit of such an act. No matter. I will send or carry the purse to him, which I have promised, and he will trouble me no more. That will be the end of both Azhort and Cladius Alburno, as far as I am concerned; though I half-hoped that I might be as well and assuredly rid of Azhort, and by the same means, as I was of Barban, the chain-forger, twelve years ago."

There was another knock at the door, and in answer to the prompt call of the expectant Lady Perci, Adria appeared.

In the lapse of time between the moment of collision on the canal and her obedience to the summons of her mother, a great change had come over the maiden. She was pale, half-apathetic, her movements mechanical, and her eyes, hitherto beaming with quickness of spirit, were languid, weary and dark as coals contrasted with the whitened cheeks.

Even Lady Perci, the prime author of her woe, surveyed her, much impressed.

"Can it be," was the reflection of this cold and dangerous woman, "that the loss of a lover can so affect one?—when the world is full of lovers, handsome, wealthy and gay. Pah! she is a chit. In a fortnight, or when she becomes the bride of my gallant Adio—which I am determined upon—she will be well satisfied that Cladius Alburno is dead."

"You sent for me, Lady Perci; I am here."

"Lady Perci!" galled on the other's mind. "I could never cure her of that. Many who have heard her address me thus, think it is but due formality. But I hate it, from her lips. Ever since I brought her to Venice—when her tongue had scarce learned its language—she has persisted in calling me 'Lady Perci.' Why will she not name me 'mother'? It cannot be that she remembers the scene which transpired eighteen years ago? No—she was but four years old. Come, Adria," she said, aloud, in a winning tone, for Lady Perci's voice was capable of most pleasant and hypocritical accent at will; "come and seat yourself. I have something to say to you."

"Well?" with an absent air, and taking the proffered seat.

"But you seem ill! What is the cause? Perhaps the want of refreshment; for I have learned that you partook of nothing at all after your return from the Academy."

"I have no appetite."

"Whence arises your melancholy, my daughter? Come, you are strangely altered since

morning. There should be no secrets between us," purred the dissembling voice of Lady Perci.

"Were you not upon the canal this afternoon, Lady Perci?"

"Lady Perci' again!" was the inward and snappish interpolation of that person.

"—And did you not mark what transpired there, just at sunset?"

"Ah! yes; a certain black gondola—that of the ex-headsman, I think—collided with the gondola of Santo, the fisherman, a man who has, so the gossip of the servants gives it, inherited a small fortune from a relative and spends his money most prodigally. The affair was of such slight importance that I had forgotten it. But what can it possibly have to do with your dejection?—if it is to that occurrence you allude."

"True," remembered Adria, dropping her head to her hand and leaning in silence upon the table edge; "Cladius was disguised to resemble Santo, the fisherman, while the true Santo remained in hiding ever since the unjust proclamation of the Grand Council. Even though I believe him dead, I will not betray my Cladius."

"What could the difficulty between Azhort, the headsman, and Santo, the fisherman, have to do with your despondent mood, my daughter?" prodded the tongue of the merciless woman.

"Nothing. I am not well to-night; I think my mind wanders at times."

Lady Perci did not press the subject further.

"I must insist, Adria, that you eat or drink of something. Take this wine. It is truly delicious and will strengthen you. If she will swallow the wine"—mentally—"there will be no difficulty in forcing her to wed with Adio. She will be as pliant in my hands as I once had Barban, the chain-forger."

Treacherous Lady Perci! The wine was drugged.

While she poured out the sparkling liquor, extending the brimming glass across the table, there was a scarce perceptible sound as of a small object falling to the floor, and immediately accompanying this was another and highly mysterious sound, like the distant and half-smothered rattling of a chain or number of chains, jerking, scraping and clanking dizzily.

"What is that?" exclaimed Adria, startled from her desolate meditation.

"Oh, nothing. Perhaps a newly-risen breeze that clinks the spangles on yonder curtain." And Lady Perci, rising quickly, went to and closed the casement—at the same time picking up a small plug or stopple and driving it into an exactly fitting hole in the paneled wall, close to a certain large and magnificent mirror.

But so hastily had she performed this action, in order to avoid the observation of the maiden, that scarce a minute elapsed ere the plug fell again to the soft carpet, this time unheard.

"You do not drink, Adria?"

"Indeed, I have no relish for wine—I never cared for it."

"Some cake, then. See how light and crisp."

Horrible Lady Perci! The cake, too, was pregnant with a drug.

"Just a little, Adria—no? But I am sure that you will taste these luscious grapes? How plump and waxy they are. Eat these." And again, mentally: "If I can persuade either the wine, cake or fruit into her mouth, she will soon be as much at my mercy, though not quite as helpless, as I once had Barban, the chain-forger, and, before him, Venturi Adello, neither of whom will ever tell the world of their fate in this red room."

Diabolical Lady Perci! The wine, cake and fruit were deeply drugged. A small dose of the ingredient would dethrone the reason for a time; a larger dose would produce insensibility; a still larger, a very severe dose, would kill instantly. The first and smaller dose was intended, by this unnatural mother, for Adria, in order to further the scheme of Adio's marriage.

Access to the red room was by a very stout door, and in this door was the broad key-hole of a massive lock, having on the inside a latchet. This latchet had been noiselessly worked open by an instrument of some kind in the hands of some one upon the outside, and a steady, flashing, single human eye had been watching Lady Perci and Adria almost from the moment that Adria entered.

The eyes belonged to Phla, who had come with her young and beloved mistress as far as the door. The persistency with which Lady Perci urged her daughter to eat or drink, struck the India-woman suspiciously, the more so, considering that she never had liked and always distrusted the wife of Marco Trienti.

It is a bad business to play the spy," she was thinking, as she watched through the key-hole, "but I love the dear babe, my Lady Adria, and I have no confidence in Lady Perci. There must be some deep meaning in this interview of the red room, and for my duty's sake I will know it."

Adria yielded to the persuasions of Lady Perci, who could not suppress a thrill of eager and

devilish anticipation as the small, shapely fingers plucked at the bunch of ripe fruit.

But as the maiden raised one of the sweet globes to her lips, and ere it passed her lips, there was an interruption to the abominable satisfaction of Lady Perci. The voice of an invisible some one struck upon the ears of the two in just one word of distinct utterance—a voice that Adria could not remember ever having heard before, whose utterance paralyzed her hand and frame and seemed to dash the fruit from her grasp.

"Poison!" rung the voice of the unseen, through the stillness of the red room.

CHAPTER X.

AZHORT IN THE PALACE.

So very sharp, distinct and thrillingly portentous was the singular and timely voice, as if in direct warning to the intended victim of Lady Perci's excessive and audacious treachery, that it seemed to tremor and reverberate in the ears of both, as they sat, for a few seconds, gazing mutely at each other.

The fruit fell from Adria's hold, and she pressed both hands over her heart. An indefinable feeling that something was happening or was about to happen in or in connection with the red room, chilled every fiber of her frame. Then, with one short, panting breath of overwhelming terror, she started from her seat and ran toward the door.

"Stay, my daughter," called Lady Perci; "it were better for us to investigate the source of that disagreeable voice we heard just now."

"Oh! I do not wish to. I cannot, will not remain in this room. I have heard enough. I would I had not come here."

"Surely, you cannot suppose the voice to have meant that those grapes contained poison? Besides, I have not yet broken the subject for which I requested your presence. I desire to press Adio's suit—"

"Lady Perci,"—Adria turned, with one hand upon the door, and in her tone there was firmness and defiance. "Lady Perci, if there was poison in the fruit, I do not accuse you with a knowledge of it. But I am certain that whoever spoke—some one who must have seen into this room, and who now sees us—meant it as a warning not to eat those grapes. I do not believe it was a breeze that rattled yonder spangled curtain a moment since, but a clink and clank of heavy chains that we heard. I will never again enter the red room; I will not now remain. Whatever you have to say to me must be said elsewhere. Let me vow this, though, for the last time and forever, I will never wed with Adio Adello, be the consequences of your displeasure severe as they may. Good-night, Lady Perci."

And, wondering at her own strong and sudden self-reliance, Adria glided from the horrible red room, leaving Lady Perci silent, though white with discomfiture and rage. Her plans for drugging the maiden had completely failed.

On the threshold Adria encountered the India-woman, whom she had partly forgotten.

"Come, Phla—come. Let me hasten away from the vicinity of the red room." And as they passed along the narrow hall: "Was it you, Phla, who uttered the word, and was it for me, when I was about to eat the grapes?—that word of warning. But why do I ask such a question? The door was closed; you did not even see us. It is very singular."

"Ay, but I was watching you, my dear lady—"

"Watching?"

"Through the keyhole."

"Then it was you. Why?"

"Lady Perci seemed very anxious for you to eat or drink—too anxious. But, though I heard the voice say 'poison,' it did not come from me. I verily believe that the cake, fruit and wine were all poisoned, and that you have escaped death."

"Oh, Phla! How could such a thing be? A mother give poison to her own child. It is too horrible to imagine; and yet—the voice—"

"Dear mistress, I love you too well to wound you by ugly speeches. But I must say, beware of Lady Perci. I do not think that she has acted like a mother toward you during your whole life—or as long as I have served you, which I commenced to do two years before her marriage with Marco Trienti. Often I have said to myself: 'If Lady Perci is the mother of my little mistress, Adria, then she has either lost or never had any affection for her child.' Forgive me when I declare that for a long time, and at this moment, I doubt very much whether Lady Perci is your mother at all!"

Adria vented a sigh of relief when they reached her private apartments. But with the sigh, and struck by the strange and serious hint of her attendant, she murmured aloud, while both continued on out to the small, eyrie-like balcony at the window:

"How you talk, Phla! Do you know what you are saying? If Lady Perci is not my mother—and as Marco Trienti is only my father because of his marriage with her—who, then, are or were my true parents? What am I? Cease, Phla; I am unhappy enough now."

"Whoever they were, dear mistress, and

whatever you may be, no one on the earth knows better than your devoted Phla that you are pure and good, and goodness could not be inherited from Lady Perci."

"Ah! it would be almost joy to me to learn that some simple and honest toiling woman had given me birth, instead of the one who now calls me child and for whom I can cherish nothing but fear. True, as you say, Lady Perci has never seemed to love me. And since she has so cruelly set her mind upon my marriage with Adio Adello—whom I loathe with my whole nature—and used such threats if I do not obey her desire, I have wondered if, indeed, a mother could be so unkind in seeking extreme unhappiness for her offspring. I will never, never wed with Adio. No—I belong to Cladius, heart, soul and flesh. Even though no priest has joined us, my heart tells me that I am his widow, and I shall be true to his memory till death brings us together in Heaven. Oh, Cladius! Cladius!"

"Believe me, my dear Lady Adria, it is too early to mourn for the loss of Cladius Alburno. Wait until the rumor and gossip of to-morrow shall tell us that most famous of warriors has surely died by the hand of the assassin—"

"If I could but partake of your faith, Phla—"

"Oh, it is a beautiful night!" in turn interrupted the India-woman, deeming it best to divert Adria's mind from thoughts of her lover.

It was night over Venice. A night of moon and stars and water rayed with rippling sprays of silver dancing lightly in the soft breathing breeze.

A night of splendor over the fairy-like environed isles, brilliant with gorgeous illumination and hundreds of winking, twinkling beacons on the vessels in the great lagoon. The airs of bustle that had lulled with the close of the day now teemed with the songs of the gondolieri, wafting here and there in bewitching melody.

A sweet sense of calm came over Adria as she gazed forth upon a scene so tranquil and so full of poesy; for there is but one Venice, and, seen by day or by night, it will live forever in remembrance as the vision of something so supernal in panoramic grandeur that the impression of its loveliness absorbs beyond all fancy.

The dream of quiet and glorious beauty was, however, destined to be rudely and terrifically changed upon that very night.

"What is it, Phla?" exclaimed Adria, almost immediately upon their reaching the high-hung balcony.

"Oh, the ghost of the canal, mistress," smilingly.

For just then seemed to float over the waters a scarce audible but positive "Hallo-o-o!" and coming from a source that it was impossible to locate. For twelve years Phla had heard the ghostly, hallooing voice wafting over the water at the entrance to the Grand Canal of the Isle Murano—in fact, all Venice knew of it: a voice that came from somewhere, no one could find out where, the tenor of whose dismal sound was ever and always: "Hallo-o-o! Hallo-o-o-o!" Hence, among the superstitious, it was firmly believed that the waters at the southern part of Isle Murano were haunted by some disquieted spirit who could say naught but "Hallo-o-o! Hallo-o-o-o!"

"Can you believe in ghosts, Phla?"

"What then is it, if not a ghost? Every night for twelve years both you and I have heard the same voice crying 'Hallo-o-o'—often so late that no one can be seen hereabout. I should be glad to have some person explain it."

"Come, let us go in. A new and heavy depression is within me, and that sound, after all that has befallen me this day, jars dismally to my ears. You may disrobe me. I will try to sleep."

They left the balcony. Phla was first to step into the room.

Scarcely had she entered—and as a loud scream burst from Adria—when she received a hard blow upon the head which laid her prone and senseless. She had just time to see that the one who struck her down was Azhort, the ex-chief of executioners; and before Adria could cry out again and for help, a thick mantle was thrown over her, almost suffocating her, and a pair of muscular arms grasped her up as if she had been but a feather's weight.

There was no resistance. She had fainted. And the last gasping words of her lips were, ere consciousness went out:

"It is Azhort, the headsman, who murdered my Cladius!"

Then, limp and helpless, she was borne along in the tight embrace of that grim and horrible personage.

And at that juncture there was another, the second, dull and distant boom of a heavy gun coming from the fortress at Porto di Lido.

The first action of Lady Perci, after the withdrawal of Adria, was to rise and cross rapidly to that portion of the wall where we have once seen her thrust a plug into a small hole close by the massive mirror.

With a quick, impatient movement, and frowning vexedly, she again put the plug in its place, this time wedging it in securely.

"Miserable accident!" hissed the scarlet lips. "It has frightened Adria away before I could renew Adio's case and impress her with the consequences of my displeasure. That fool, up there!—to utter such a word at the very moment when she would have fallen into my power as completely as himself, twelve years ago, and as Barban, the chain-forger, did. I have oft heard his impotent mutterings, but a word like that—'poison'—he never till now spoke. And how could he be aware that I had designs upon Adria? I shall punish him for his interference, although clearly an accident. Let me look to him."

Evidently, Lady Perci was well aware of the source of that significant and timely voice whose intervention saved Adria from the influence of a drug which, for a time—long enough to suit the purpose of the heartless schemer—would have unsettled her reason to such an extent that the merest wish of a person, to be loathed and defied under ordinary circumstances, would have been promptly though drowsily obeyed.

It may be said, however, that extreme emergency had prompted Lady Perci to this unnatural method for the accomplishment of her purpose—a design of utmost import in connection with an ambition, heretofore shown, to become the richest and proudest lady in Venice. She was well aware of the deep attachment existing between her husband and Adria. Did Adria, finally, throw herself upon Marco Trienti, as a last resort to relieve from the persecuting importunities of her mother and that mother's favorite, Adio Adello, the whole sympathy of the honorable senator might be at once enlisted, and Marco Trienti would prove a formidable champion in behalf of the maiden.

"Once I can gain control of her faculties," Lady Perci had resolved, ruthlessly, "I can easily have my way, without exciting the suspicions of Marco Trienti. She will be a mere automaton at my command. I plainly see that I must dose her—though not so heavily—as I did Barban, the chain-forger, and Venturi Adello, twelve years ago."

To serve the maiden she called her child in almost a similar manner as practiced upon two other persons, at a time many years prior to this date, was the prime object of the summons which brought Adria to the red room.

But whatever the plan, however inhuman, it had failed utterly for the present. Fairly quivering with anger at the cause of this failure, and bent upon chastising the author of it, Lady Perci drew forth, from a private receptacle beneath the table, a supple whip with a short, stout, wooden handle and a lash nearly ten feet long.

This whip she uncoiled and threw outward until it lay like a limp snake its full length on the carpet. Then she bared her arms—arms that, though fair and smooth, showed muscle and firmness.

Suddenly she whirled the short handle round and round about her head till the lash appeared to be a thing of cruel animation, forming large coils of rings in the air. There was a *swish!*—a sharp *crack!*

"Good. A few such on his back will teach him to keep a still tongue in his head and not again interfere, even by accident, with my projects!"

With the whip wrapped around one arm, and with a candelabra in one hand, she went back to the mirror.

For a second she paused to contemplate herself in the highly-polished surface which reflected back, despite the ravage of years and the impress of the wicked passions of those years—an image of a woman once considered a beauty and still possessed of many superficial charms.

"Ah, Lady Perci!" she addressed, to her mirrored resemblance, "you are by no means yet a wrinkled hag. With the treasure chest of Venturi Adello and some handsome features remaining, I may one day have the whole of Venice—gondolieri to signoria—suing at my feet. But, there—pah! I am dreaming ahead too fast. Wait until I have the treasure-chest of Venturi Adello."

At a slight touch upon a spring concealed beneath a curious and exquisite anaglyph, the mirror swung slowly outward, revealing an intermural stairway, three steps up the ascent of which was the first iron door of the passage leading to the dungeon-like chamber—all described in a previous chapter—and upon the other two sides presenting an apparently solid wall of heavy block masonry, which indicated that there could be no other entrance to the secret place than by the mirror in the red room.

There could now be no doubt that Lady Perci had some one confined in the upper portion of the palace, and that she was about to inflict punishment with the whip upon that person for having, unintentionally and by means of the microscopic tube, frightened Adria from the red room and thus from a wretched fate prepared for her.

But whatever her wrathful impulse, it was startlingly overthrown.

In the very instant that the mirror swung open, a burst of fizzing fire nearly blinded her, seeming to deluge and envelop her.

From the depth of this almost supernatural flame arose, glaring and awful, the wolf-face, tiger-eyes and devilish shape of Azhort, the headsman.

The unexpected shock momentarily paralyzed Lady Perci. The one second of bewilderment and affright was most unlucky for her.

"Fury and guns!" snorted the growling voice of the deathsman, as he bounded forward.

And in a trice his terrible gripe was on her throat, choking back into a gurgle the shriek for help which she would have given.

CHAPTER XI.

FAUCHO AND THE HEADSMAN.

In order to explain the presence of Azhort in the bedchamber of Adria, and in the aperture behind the movable mirror in the red room at the moment when Lady Perci was about to ascend to the prison-chamber, whip in hand for the chastisement of the person who bad, by accident, thwarted her perfidious intentions—and previous to both, the appearance of his scorching eyes in the eyes of the painted picture of Rupert Riali—it is necessary to return to the man-gorgon when, in obedience to his command, Tobato, his dwarfed, misshapen and ugly son, turned the gleaming steel prow of the black gondola directly toward the palace of the Trienti, the illuminated windows of which were now plainly visible.

"No good is to come of this. Omen is in my bones," growled the headsman, in surly and pondering accents. "The fact that my new gondolier was no gondolier at all, but some knave in disguise, satisfies me that he must have been a spy. If a spy, then he doubtless understood all that passed and was said in my abode. Another spy, too, at my door. Flames smite them! Oh, if I could but have fastened my gripe on one or both!"

"I would like very much to rap him on the crown with this oar—the man who swims," squeaked Tobato, who was keeping a sharp lookout for the head of the man who had tripped him and then dived from the stone-landing at the "Deathsman's Fort."

"Bend stronger to your oar, my son."

"Indeed, I am doing my best. Watch me. Look at my spangles for the motion of my arms. Hi! how they shine to-night. I am to have a new suit and new spangles, am I not—when we get the treasure of Venturi Adello, and I secure pretty Adria for my bride, and when I become a pirate prince, eh?"

"A tubful of spangles and a dozen suits, Tobato, if all goes well."

"A tubful—and a dozen! Hi! Now see how I can work this oar."

Tobato was very vain of the innumerable tiny gilt and silver spangles stitched over his arms and the upper portion of his crooked little body.

As he strained and squirmed with all his strength at the oar, which was quite too ponderous for him, stimulated by the prospect of so many new spangles and suits, the spangles he wore glistened and rayed gayly in the brilliant moonlight like so many changeful and minute sparks.

Azhort became silent. He was concocting carefully his programme of action in the event of unearthing that secret which he had believed to exist in the life of Lady Perci for twelve years.

But the plans he formed during the remainder of the brief journey across the moonlit water, were signally altered almost from the moment of his arrival at the palace.

"Depart, now," he said, bending low and close to the ear of his son, when they reached the landing before the imposing edifice. "Be sure that you are at this spot precisely at the hour of twelve."

"Hi! Never fear. And on my way back—for I think I shall go and talk with my brave mother over the splendid luck that is about to happen my very smart father—I will perhaps meet the floating head of that spy. We have only passed one boat, and that may not have picked up the toad; he may still be swimming. Hi! It would be fine sport to tap him lightly at first, then a little harder, then—"

"Be off. If you find him, smite him bone and marrow."

"Hi! That will I!"

"Remember. At twelve."

The somber, creeping gondola then moved out into the canal, the tired arms of Tobato sculling leisurely along.

Azhort ascended the broad stairs, thinking:

"Now I shall soon see whether Barban, the chain-forger, deceived me on his death bed, twelve years ago, or about the time Venturi Adello entered this place. Aha! I have kept my secret well—I and my family. Why should I divulge to any one that I saw Venturi Adello enter here, one stormy night, twelve years ago?—that I and my wife watched steadfast, day and night, for 'most a year, to see him come out?—that he never came out? Would that he had!—for he would then and now have been in my power, instead of Lady Perci's. She well knew of the chest of treasure possessed by her husband at the time he started to return from a visit and examination of his interest in the silver mines of Hungary and other mines of pre-

cious stones. Ho! Riali had sharp counselors. It turned out that the treasure went by another galleon, and no one knew where it was to be deposited, save Venturi Adello and an old fisherman on the lower coast. That fisherman must be dead by this, for it was eighteen years since. Even had he lived, he could not, in eighteen years, remove and expend so vast a treasure. I remember striking Venturi Adello into the sea with a blow of my cutlass. Lady Perci must have ascertained that Venturi Adello was the only man in the world who could divulge where to find the treasure; not knowing of the fisherman. That is the reason why Adello never left the palace. Lady Perci, too, is after the treasure. Ha! Perhaps he has refused to tell, and, weary of his stubbornness, she has killed him to be rid of him. Burn my heart! if she has, I will tear out her eyes!"

"HALT!" challenged the vigilant guardsman at the palace entrance.

Azhort was brought to a standstill and roused from his whispered thoughts by the gruff voice and the keen point of a lance leveled within a few inches of his breast.

"What is your business here?" And as the shaggy head of the comer was thrown up and back, and the wolf-like visage with its piercing orbs was fully displayed in the bright light of the hall: "Ouf! it is the devil himself! Azhort, ex-chief of the executioners! Shrivell my buskins!—you dare intrude into the palace of my Lord Trienti! Wheel about!—march!"

If the eyes of Azhort were fearful to behold, his smile, or grin, or smirk—all in one—was scarce less infernal. The lips narrowed and lengthened sideways till his teeth, like huge, pure and knife-edged pearls, seemed ready to grind and bite simultaneously with the slight inclination of his head and bending of his body in a bow of mock humbleness, as he quietly said:

"My very good friend, I come to see Lady Perci."

"To see—halt there! Not one step, on your life! You to see Lady Perci, forsooth! Out! Sir headsman, you are a lunatic as well as imp of Satan! Go to the madhouse of San Lazzaro! You—haw! haw!—you to see Lady Perci! Halt!—or I shall pin you through and through. Begone. You cannot enter; it is forbidden, and you know it well."

"But, my zealous friend, if I am forbidden, perhaps this is not?" and he held aloft the costly jeweled ring which his nimble fingers had snatched, unobserved, from the hand of Lady Perci on the Grand Canal. His satanic smirk vanished and his voice assumed an imperious accent.

"I must see Lady Perci, fellow."

"Pass, sir headsman. I acknowledge the signet ring of Lady Perci. But"—inwardly, as he permitted the other to continue, and looking after the dwarfed, broad and powerful figure in its sable mantle—"shrivell my buskins if I like the turn of this! I would much prefer pitching him out on the point of my lance. There will be a noisy war when it is known that I admitted Azhort, ex-chief of executioners, and war again when my Lord Trienti learns that the signet ring of Lady Perci was the passport shown. No matter. I think I have done as much my duty as I could. What eyes the imp has! What a strange, hyena smile! Snake, wolf, devil and dwarf-giant! I remember both the eyes and the smile, when he used to chop off the heads of the condemned, as if with gay relish at every stroke. Ouf! to the dogs with Azhort!"

The soldier then dismissed the matter entirely from his mind until, a few moments later, the enraged senator accosted him and that scene followed in which Lady Perci scouted the idea of Azhort having her signet ring, and pronounced the sentinel a falsifier.

Azhort had an acquaintance in the palace, though not aware of it till he had taken a dozen or so steps along the hall, as if seeking some one to whom he might impart the nature of his business there.

No one was in that portion of the hall, it chanced, save a page. This page had been an intent witness of all that transpired at the entrance.

As the evil-browed visitor drew closer, the page cast his eyes down and a momentary, chilling tremor shook him. Then the gaze of the deathsman lighted with recognition, and his hard, bony palm tapped the shoulder of the page.

"Fauchol!" he said, slowly, with surprised satisfaction.

"Well?—and thou art my master."

"Guns and gore! this is my lucky day. 'Master,' say you? Oh, no. Since I am no longer chief executioner, nor executioner at all, I am not the master of Montago and Fauchol. What has become of your brother, strong Montago—eh? Readier boys than you and he never strangled a knave for me in the ducal dungeons. Where is Montago?"

"No longer in Venice—master."

"Ha! so it will slip out. Many a thump I gave you, Fauchol, in teaching you to call me 'master.' So. A short time has made a great change in you. When you and Montago served

me for the business of the strangling-chamber, you were slim, though lithe of frame and quick-gripped with the cord, and hair cropped short. Ho! you are now a page. Supple and more robust; a fine complexion; curling locks; indeed, a quite good-looking youth. And how came you to be a page, Fauchol?"

"My master," half-interrupted the young Spaniard. "You must know that Marco Trienti despises you. He is in that room yonder—may see you. You are bold to venture here so far ahead of the time."

"Ahead of the time? What time? What mean you?"

The page surveyed him in astonishment.

"Can it be possible you do not know that, when the iron hammer of the clock strikes twelve the grand pillage—the overthrow of Venice—is to commence? And the runners and spies have said that you were with the duke's party. I charge with the bravos on this palace. There are ten of us in all under this roof. Heard you not the boom of a gun a short time since? There will be three guns discharged. The first gun means, that the garrison of the fortress at Porto di Lido—whence the signals will come—have been silently and successfully overpowered. The second gun will concentrate the party of the duke, fully armed, at various points in readiness for the outbreak, and warn the pages and bravos of every palace to prepare. The third gun, at midnight, will fill the streets and canals with the uprising faction; torch, sword and plunder will pervade the balance of the night: the universal cry will be, 'Strike for the duke! Death to the misrulers of Venice!' How could you, of all who are in the plot, be so ignorant of this?"

A great change came over the countenance and spirit of Azhort, as this exciting intelligence was poured into his astounded ears.

"By the darkle of death!—no. Boy, there must be some mistake. To-morrow night was the time fixed upon." He gripped the arm of Fauchol in a painful way.

"This very night, and the first gun has already sounded. So orders the man whose sign I now give you," and Fauchol made an almost imperceptible motion with his hands.

"Ho! The hailing sign of those who serve the duke, and invented by Antoine Jaffier?"

"Even so."

The features of the headsman were glowing; his eagle, snake and wild-beast eyes widened, batted and flashed with all the consuming fires of his implacable and brutish nature. His next speech came rapid and hissing.

"I am glad to know this. I have not a minute to spare. Luckily, I am armed with my dagger; no one in Venice can use it as I can. Now, mark me. There is a room on the first floor of this palace, the furniture of which is green and the walls of marble paneling, with half-imbedded and fluted columns intersecting each panel. Its finish is quite plain; no pictures nor—"

"It is the room for reception of strange visitors—yonder, with but a loose draping of green curtains for a doorway. But if you did not know of the pillage that commences to-night—you who are to become chief executioner, when Venice falls, of all opposers to the marquis, the ambassador and the duke—and it is not in connection with that you are in the Trienti palace, then why are you here?"

"Annoy me not with questions. By my blood! I tell you my minutes are few. I will wait in the room of marble panels. Go you and say to Lady Perci Trienti, that Azhort, the headsman, desires an interview in private and by the power of her own signet-ring, which I wear—see."

"But if you are found, meantime?" queried Fauchol, uneasily, as he led the way to the apartment described by Azhort.

"No matter. Do as I bid—you who have called me master," pushing aside the green and heavy curtains. "Ha! ha! Deliver my message. Ha! ha! Have no fears that I will be found. And when I am found, I care not who I may meet in the palace of the Trienti. Ha! ha! Light in darkness!—no. Begone." And when he stood alone within the room of marble panels, with fluted and half-imbedded columns between each panel, and casting one hurried glance around him, he exclaimed: "Ho! it is the same so minutely described by Barban, the chain-forger, on his death-bed. He lied not, so far. Now let Marco Trienti, or any one else, find me if they can!"

CHAPTER XII. THE PERIL OF ADRIA.

As the reader has learned, there was something of far more importance than the mere desire to receive a second and heavier purse—in complete payment for the assassination of Cladius Alburno—that had filled the soul of Azhort with fierce gloating upon being able to use the signet-ring of Lady Perci as an omnipotent means of gaining entrance to the Trienti palace—this doubly so since the revelation by the page, for the words of the sly, deceitful, not unhandsome ruffian in dissembling garb, showed him that he had but a short time in which to accomplish the greatest desire of his life, and now was, possibly, his only and last opportunity.

Instantly upon the withdrawal of Fauchol, the page, to execute his errand of announcement—who could not help wondering what business Azhort could have with the proud wife of the senator, and marveling again as to how he could obtain such a valuable ring, as a signet from Lady Perci—the headsman took from the pocket of his cape a long and broad folded parchment, almost ragged with age, opened it and fixed his burning eyes upon it.

"Ha! there is no mistake. So far, so good for this diagram given to me by Barban, the chain-forger, ere he breathed his last and went to the devil. A common rogue was Barban. But he did not know how beyond price was this document, when he bequeathed it to me as the fruit of his sneaking and nose-poking at a time when Lady Perci employed him to forge a chain—a stout and endless chain—first round the column and then round the body of Venturi Adello. 'Revenge me upon Lady Perci, who is the cause of my death!' were the last words of Barban. Ho! be sure of that revenge, ghost of Barban, for I, too, have a thirst for revenge upon Lady Perci, because she jabbed out the eye of my wife, Bal-Balla, in the fight on the deck of the *Unita*. But, first of all things, the treasure of Venturi Adello—"

He stopped short in his hissed utterances, half-crumbled the parchment in his grasp and tip-toed to the curtain-hung and gothic-arched entrance.

Casting a glance between the draping folds, he saw Adria, Phla and Fauchol on the grand staircase, and heard the first named cry, as she clung to the balustrade for momentary support:

"Azhort, the headsman! He in the palace! No—no, it is scarce possible. What could bring him here, and with the signet-ring of my mother? The murderer of my—Come, Phla. Oh, haste! I shall not feel safe until I am with Marco Trienti, my father!"

Azhort stepped hastily backward.

"Dashes of thunder!" he exclaimed, unfolding and once more scanning the drawing and explanations on the worn parchment, with body bent and eyes distended in fast accumulating excitement. "Dashes of thunder! She will hasten to Marco Trienti and inform him that I am here. Search will follow. Though I do not fear, personally, Trienti and a half-score of such dullards as the guard at the palace front, it will not do for them to find me. I must be about obeying the instructions of this diagram of Barban's—serviceable knave. 'In the room of marble panels and columns between each panel, furniture upholstering green, on the first floor,'—pah! I know it by heart. 'Five steps to the right'—so—"measuring off five steps as directed. "'Five steps to the left'—so"—half-turning and repeating the movement. "'Then stoop. Pull out base, and column can be swung round on pivots fixed at top and bottom.' Ha! it brings me to the second column. I stoop. So"—inserting his strong finger-nails in a scarce perceptible line or crevice at the under portion of the convex and false base of the half-imbedded column. "I pull this out. Oho! Good! May the horned fiend be easy with your soul, thou most reliable rascal, Barban!"

Drawing forward the sectional base or pedal, there was a slight click, and the column—or the seeming column, for it was but circular of form on the outside and flat upon the inside portion—could be swung slowly and heavily open half its greatest diameter, by gripping the fingers in the deep fluting, disclosing a black aperture.

Without pause, Azhort squeezed through into the dark space, and, having committed to mind, years before this night, the instructions of the diagram, he presently had the column and the spring pedal adjusted to their original and deceptive position.

Scarce a minute later there was a hubbub in the hall and in the room of marble panels, the sounds of which came faint and inarticulately to the headsman, as he stood safe enough from all discovery within a very narrow passage that caused him to stand sideways for the comfort of his broad-shouldered frame.

"Three steps along here," he mumbled, "and I will find on my right hand, head high, a spring, or something which will open two eyelets in a picture—though what picture, and into what room they will afford survey, Barban did not tell, perhaps did not know. First, let me have a light."

He produced two short, jointed sticks from an inner pocket of his cape, one of these sticks surmounted by a globular hollow piece. The top of the latter he unscrewed, and, fitting the sticks to their socket, soon had a lighted, short-handled flambeau that shed a red radiance upon the tomby niche.

Curious to ascertain the utility of the two certain small holes or eyelets, to be found, according to the diagram, five steps ahead, Azhort sidled along, holding the flambeau high. Easily discovering the eyelets, or latches, as they proved to be, head high upon the wall that would have been at his right hand, had he been able to proceed face first, and as there was no intricacy about their arrangement, he twisted them open, placed his two eyes to the two small

holes that were, though he knew it not, contrived to fit in and represent the painted eyes and eyebrows of Rupert Riali.

From this picture the orbs of the headsman flashed forth upon Adria and the India-woman, as they silently awaited the return of Marco Trienti.

"U-so!" he grunted. "There is the doll I purpose giving Tobato for a wife or plaything, when I have secured the treasure of Venturi Adello and we are safe on the sea with a black flag and a Barbary crew. By this chance view of her, I am reminded that the diagram of Barban shows a secret way to gain her apartment—nearly all apartments, in fact, on the front side of the palace. Lavish luck!"—with rapturous anticipation—"I will secure her and abduct her in my own gondola. Once in 'the deathsman's fort,' it would take a fleet to wrest her from me. They little know how ready is the fort of Azhort to repel, if attacked by a force demanding the person of Sadrac, the half-Moor pirate. Ha! ha! ha! Wait till the stroke of the bell and the riot. Now, then, here is my Lord Trienti. A merry rant for nothing he has had, I surmise."

The brief interview which ensued between the senator and Adria was distinctly and eagerly overheard by the owner of those baleful eyes in the eyes of the picture of Rupert Riali. Azhort was much surprised at learning therefrom that Marco Trienti had been wedded previous to his bonds with Lady Perci, that he had lost his bride and a child during a storm at sea, and that Adria resembled, at times, his lost loved one.

It was when the maiden, sobbing, reverted to the assassination of her lover—and while Azhort, so intent with listening that his eyes were horribly brilliant and he nigh forgot all else, that her glance rested upon the picture of Rupert Riali, and the sight she saw there froze every tear on lid and cheek.

The scintillating, blood-curdling, unmistakable eyes of the headsman!

"His eyes! I see his eyes!" she shrieked.

On the instant he knew he was discovered, or imagined as much, Azhort drew back and snapped shut the latches. In doing so the red light of his flambeau illuminated the openings, and its glare produced the effect which caused Adria to say that the eyes she saw had turned to living flame and burned themselves to darkness.

"Destruction! I was near betraying myself, if I have not in fact," he growled, sidling forward again. "Besides, this is all a waste of time. The second and the third gun may sound from the fortress at Porto di Lido before I am through here. I must not be caught unprepared to do my share of the night's work—neither must I lose the treasure of Venturi Adello. Oh, no!"

The period consumed by the deathsman in reaching a secret panel in the wall of Adria's bedchamber—which was accomplished by tedious processes of climbing, crawling, squeezing, and with many maledictions on the architect who arranged such crooked ways and means—sufficed for the maiden to return from her interview with Lady Perci in the red room.

Drawing the panel slightly ajar he watched.

When the two females stepped out upon the small balcony, and Adria became wrapt in the contemplation of a moonlight scene wrought to raise and nourish sweet, reposed dreams of romance, Azhort left his covert and came forward with the stealth of a cat, and had almost gained the window when Phla turned to re-enter.

A single blow of his merciless fist struck down the faithful attendant, and in another minute he had borne the insensible form of Adria into the recess behind the panel—just as the second warning boom of a gun came from the fortress at Porto di Lido, saying to every gold-bought bravo and assassin in Venice:

"Concentrate! Prepare!"

Having extinguished his flambeau, Azhort now relighted it and proceeded to bind the wrists and ankles of his unconscious captive with strips torn from her own skirts.

With great difficulty—having to carry both the maiden and the flambeau in such a cramped space—he ascended a wooden stairway hardly two feet wide, pausing at a door constructed of one solid plate of iron and without any visible fastening, though tight and firm.

The instructions of the diagram soon enabled him to open this door, and passing through and closing the door carefully, he deposited his burden on another series of narrow steps and sat down to recover breath.

Adria then regained her senses. The close, grim walls, like some narrow dismal tomb, the crouching and hideous shape of the headsman—to her dizzied faculties more like an apparition, at first, of the monster who had slain Cladius Alburno—all, shown by the ghostly glimmer of the flambeau, sputtering in an atmosphere of solemn stillness, congealed the blood in her veins and iced every nerve with chills of terror.

"Ho! you are alive again—good," exclaimed Azhort, with one of his ghoul-like smirks.

"Heaven 'fend me! Where am I? What is this place? A-h! you are Azhort—murderer!"

Silence. Not so loud, at your peril. I am

Azhort, the headsman; you are in my power. Will you promise not to cry out?—or shall I gag you? It would be a pity to spoil that shapely mouth, when it is intended for the kisses of my son, Tobato. Ay, you are to wed him, shortly. Have you never heard of him? A father's word for it, that Tobato is a bright and promising young knave. You are to be the bribe of the son of the ex-chief of executioners of Venice. For that you are now my prisoner. You are quite a pretty maid; I think Tobato will fancy you enough to try and make you happy. Resign yourself to your fate. You cannot escape—there is no hope. No, I will not gag you; but remember: if I hear any alarm from your lips, the sound will insure the drawing of this edge over your weasand, even though you are the promised bride of Tobato," and he exhibited his long, two-edged knife, tapping it and nodding significantly.

Adria was speechless. She could only gaze upon the dire demon in whose clutches she found herself, half doubting if her eyes did not deceive her and her ears mock their hearing when they understood the hints of Azhort. She had never seen Tobato, but report circulated abundantly of the humped and spider-like deformity known as the headsman's son, making him in all a subject of wickedness, ugliness and loathing.

Had she desired, and had assistance been within call, she could not then have made a sound to summon it, so benumbed and parched grew her throat and tongue before the hyena smirk and red-black blazing eyes of her exultant captor.

But in a second, and while Azhort contemplated her with the hungry ardor of a jungle beast—himself inflamed by her surpassing loveliness—she managed to articulate, faintly:

"Man—if you are man—you cannot mean me harm? I have never injured you. Is it not enough that you have near broken my heart by brutally stabbing one whom I loved more than all men on earth? Why have you brought me, by force and after striking my faithful nurse, to this strange place?—so like the recess walls of a grave that I could imagine myself dead or in a nightmare but for your presence. Oh! horrible—horrible! Even now, I can scarce believe it real—"

"Powers of passion! You are here to remain until I take you to the arms of my son, Tobato, who loves you like the wild bird loves its mate. Fix your mind on that."

"Oh, listen to me! Cannot money bribe you?—tears? You would not give me to such a miserable fate!"

"Fate, forsooth! You will be a pretty pirate princess. Think of that. Ha! ha! ha! Tears? Tears bribe me? They are the water-wrath of children. Gold? Oh, I have a plenty of such stuff, and will soon possess enough to purchase a kingdom. But there: this is more waste of time. I have much to attend to before I take you to the embrace of my clever Tobato. I shall leave you for awhile. As I have but one flambeau, you must be content to remain in darkness until my return. Remember: if you open your mouth above a whisper—"again he tapped the blade of the long, two-edged knife that gleamed in the light of the flambeau.

"Mercy! Oh! mercy, if thou art a man!" begged the unfortunate maiden, piteously.

"Be still, if you wish to save your mouth from a gag."

With this, Azhort stepped over her and continued the ascent of the narrow wooden stairs. At the top he came to what appeared to be the termination of the upper portion of the secret passage: a stout wall of square stone blocks, a single block as wide as the way it barred.

But by this he was not to be deterred. Brief inspection discovered a slit or seam between the edge of the block and the inner or false wall. Balancing the flambeau against his arm-pit and inserting his fingers in the scant hold, he pulled sideways with all his strength.

The block was a movable one, on well-fitted grooves, and could be pushed or pulled into the outer and thicker wall of the palace. Many years of disuse, however—for be it remembered that the personage from whom Lady Perci's first husband had purchased the building did not acquaint the latter either with the existence of this stone or the extensive hidden ways of the palace, if, indeed, he knew of them at all—had filled the crevices with a dusty and stiffening accumulation, and to overcome this required every strain of that giant's grippe for which the muscle of the headsman was notorious.

Having pushed aside the block, he crawled through.

Adria, bound hand and foot, was in total darkness, ignorant of her whereabouts, and trembling in the prospect of a wretched fate which her overburdened brain, preyed upon by her hopeless situation, exaggerated to thrice its terrors.

Below her, the impassable iron door; above her, the implacable fiend, Azhort; at her side, cold, stony walls, through which her weak voice might not be heard, even had she the temerity to bring upon herself the execution of her captor's murderous threat.

"Oh, Cladius! Oh, merciful Heaven!" she moaned. "Deliver me from this! Would that I could be with you, dear Cladius! You, at least, are free from misery! And yet, I am not fit to die, else I would invite the stroke of the same knife, perhaps, that robbed you of life!"

Despite the warning of Azhort, her voice broke into loud sobs, filling the impenetrable prison with sounds of her heart's distress.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SCAR ON LADY PERCI'S NECK.

WHEN Azhort had gained the other side of the huge stone block, he immediately, and by means of a furrow on this front—corresponding in position with the crack or space on the opposite front—drew it back into its admirably fitted place.

He stood in a sort of niche not over three feet deep, by two feet broad and eight feet high. Before him was the first of the three iron doors of ingress to the secret prison chamber at the top of the palace.

"Ho! I am so far—and not very far, now, from Venturi Adello. There are three of these doors. Their bolts—so said Barban—yes, here they are. Nothing must detain me now, if I would be ready for the last signal gun from Porto di Lido. How very quiet everything seems. But there will be noise enough by daylight. It was a clever stroke on the part of the duke to seize the fortress. No doubt he is long since there, issuing orders. So the government must have caught wind of it. Well, I do not think the troops or battle barges can move in time, now, to nip the bud of the outbreak. Let me hasten my business with Venturi Adello. These bolts—"

The only fastening to the door consisted of three large bolts upon that side where stood Azhort, these at intervals at the bottom, falling into a stone sill.

He stooped to raise these bolts. And it was while in the act, with his hand on the first bolt, that the mirror of the red room—with the utility of which he was familiar but did not then give thought to—was swung open by Lady Perci Trienti, revealing her to him most inopportune.

He started to his feet with a jerk that cast the flambeau up and outward, astounding and almost blinding Lady Perci with its sudden and brilliant flare, at the same time exclaiming, with a hoarse, mad snort:

"Fury and guns!"—and instantly had her by the throat.

The ruthless, painful gripe, the barbarous countenance of her assailant, his ghostly and, to her, unaccountable appearance from the niche behind the mirror, and a conviction that she was about to be strangled, all produced an effect that was remarkable in a woman of Lady Perci's caliber.

With just one glance of stupefaction, dismay, and recognition into the visage of the headsman, she swooned utterly and sunk to the floor in a limp, still heap.

"Pit of perdition! I hope I have not squeezed out her life!" exclaimed Azhort, stooping over the motionless figure. "I have promised to preserve her for Bal-Balla's vengeance—my Fazienta, who has not forgotten the spear-thrust Lady Perci gave her on the deck of the Unita. By what unlucky chance did this woman intrude upon me when, in a few moments more, I would have been in the presence of Venturi Adello, bargaining for treasure. I had forgotten that Barban gave detail of this opening into the red room. I must revive her. Pest! Here is more delay."

Hastening to the table, he snatched up one of the bottles of wine and poured out a quantity into the silver goblet. This he forced down the throat of Lady Perci; then he loosened her rich, ruffled gorget.

And simultaneously with the last act, he leaped, staring, to his feet, giving vent to a loud, astonished:

"O-h-o!" and his dark orbs kindled like coals at a discovery made in unfastening the high frill of the gorget.

When at last she unclosed her eyes, Azhort half-sat, half-leaned on the edge of the bounty-spread table, swinging one limb slowly to and fro.

"Well, after all, monster, you did not mean to murder me!" were her first words.

"Had I, do you think you would now be looking at me, and I here? Oh, no. Let me aid you to rise and swear repentance for giving you that fright"—mockingly.

Lady Perci tottered to her feet, and across to a sofa, refusing his touch as if it was pollution.

"How came you there?" she asked, faintly, indicating the opening in the wall.

Her ever alert perception told her at once that there must be secrets of the palace with which Azhort was familiar and of which she was ignorant.

The demonish smirk was on his face, exhibiting the pearl-and-keen teeth.

"How I came there is a secret of my own. My object—well, before we part I may even tell you that."

"Your object, I suppose, is the other purse

for ridding me of Cladius Alburno. I will send for it—”

“Stay, there!” he commanded, sternly, and with a gesture, as she made a movement toward the door.

“Deathsman! This to me! Do you know to whom you speak?”

“Ay. Be seated. A word with you.”

“Save my soul! but I shall summon assistance and have you—”

“If you do, fire and flame! I'll— But you will not.”

Lady Perci began walking rapidly back and forth, chafing like a thousand tempers enshained. She was silent, however, reflecting:

“There is murder in the look of this man. How to be rid of him?”

“A word with you, I said, Lady Perci. I have discovered why you were so eager to stab out the eye of my wife, Bal-Balla.”

“Your wife? Bal-Balla? I have never seen her; but I have heard of her—another monster, like yourself.”

“Look at me closely. Can you think who I would resemble if I wore a tight, peakless cap of red satin and black tassel?—boots above my knees, a broad black belt and apron, embroidered jacket, cutlass in hand and a hundred men to obey my will?”

“Good Heaven! you are—”

“Yes, I am he: Sadrac, the half-Moor pirate. For eighteen years, Lady Perci, you and I have schemed for the same end, and my wife—who at that date long ago was Fazienta, the pirate's bride—has planned revenge for the loss of her eye. For twelve years I have tried in vain to enter this palace. Had I known what I now know I would have compelled you, ere this, to get me admittance, or denounced and proved you to Marco Trienti as a woman who once plotted the robbery and destruction of her first husband.”

“'Tis false! And had I known that Azhort, the headsman, and Sadrac, the pirate, were one and the same, I could have brought your neck under the edge of your own ax! Oh, that I had known it!”

“To a certainty you and I are deadly enemies. But when I say that you plotted the destruction of Rupert Riali, it is because I have seen on your neck the scar of a knife-blow—ha! yes—there—just beneath your gorget.”

Not until her attention was thus called to it did she notice her unloosed gorget, and, as she rearranged it, concealing the knife-scar alluded to, she exclaimed:

“Ah! it is met. You were at some pains then, deathsman, to revive me.”

“Oh, by that scar I discover you to be the pretended fisher-lad who came to the stronghold of Sadrac, the pirate, and offered to show how an immense treasure could be secured, if I would pledge myself, by a most binding oath, to share it with you. This was the treasure-chest of Rupert Riali, your first husband, and it was packed with precious stones. You wished him out of your way in order to enjoy the treasure as a free and ambitious woman. Fazienta, my brave bride, wanted to retain you for ransom; for, though she did not know you to be a woman in disguise, she suspected you as something more than a fisher's lad and capable of bringing us a prize of money. She laid hands on you. You struck her. She stabbed you. A fatal blow it would have been, had I not caught a part of the blade by interposing my jacket-sleeve. While your neck was being dressed we made the bargain. Then the attack on the Unita. We did not get the treasure. I afterward ascertained that only two persons in the world knew where to look for it: one, Venturi Adello, and I had stricken him into the sea with my own arm. But I did not cease to hope that I might some day stumble upon a clew to this lost wealth. I planned so that it was believed that I and my crew had perished. I came to Venice. You know what I have been since. Blood-letting seems to have been my destiny. As to your giving my head to my own ax, Lady Perci, ho! let me tell you that in a few hours from now you will be powerless to injure any one.”

“What means the vulture?” questioned Lady Perci, in her bosom, and gazing at him in astonishment. “Ah! I smell wine. He says that in a few hours I will be powerless. Yes, this is certainly wine upon my gorget,” snuffing downward at the damp gorget. “Indeed, I almost imagine that I taste it. Save my soul! my mouth is moist even now.” Then, as her glance fell upon the depleted wine-bottle on the table: “Deathsman!” she screamed, with a deep ague of suspicion, “have you dared to give me any of that wine?”

The reply of Azhort well-nigh froze the nerves within her.

“You drank quite a dose of it—or, I forced you to drink it.”

“Wretch!”

He elevated his shaggy brows surprisedly.

“Demon!” groaned the alarmed woman. “It is poisoned! What I intended for another has befallen me. Already my brain swims—my heart seems iced! Malediction on you forever, devil-deathsman, truly! Haste. In that drawer beneath the table. A white paper—a white

powder. Give it me. Lose no time. Perhaps it is now too late.”

She threw herself upon the sofa, fairly panting with apprehension.

“Bows and bullets! how should I know the wine was poisoned?—though that is the reputation given by Barban to repasts in this red room. I was near helping myself to a goblet of it. But here is the powder.”

So anxious was Azhort to preserve the life of Lady Perci for the vengeance of Bal-Balla, that he watched with serious concern the effect of the whitish powder which she emptied, tremblingly, on her tongue.

Leaning backward and closing her eyes, she relapsed into a sort of stupor, in which the muscles of face and limb twitched anon.

“I think I know that antidote,” muttered the observant headsman, standing before her like a grim, scowling statue. “A neutral for a special poison discovered and handed down by Vidus, the Florentine. If the same stuff is now working in her that she administered to Barban, the chain-forger, and had I thought of it, I might have saved the life of the unlucky dog, after all. I had best secure the door against intrusion here. For if she survives, I have a little more to say to Lady Perci.”

And leaving her side stealthily, he wrenched round the key from the outside of the door and turned it again upon the inside.

CHAPTER XIV.

AZHORT MAKES ANOTHER CAPTIVE.

FORTUNATELY for Lady Perci, the drug which her own hands had introduced into the cake, fruit and wine, for the purpose of dosing Adria, was, as previously stated, only of sufficient quantity or power to stupefy a victim and render him or her pliant at the will of the person administering it. This, and the fact that she was enabled promptly to use the antidote for a poison so rare that none had known of it—until the published volumes of that renowned Florentine physician, Vidus, acquainted the old hemisphere with both the poison and the remedy—saved her from any severe results, and at the expiration of a few seconds she aroused, apparently thoroughly recovered.

Probably, had Azhort known the exact consequences to ensue upon his giving her the drug—instead of being convinced, by her evident alarm, that she was about to die—he would not so readily have found and furnished the white, antidotal powder; but, exulting in her mishap, would have said: “do this,” and “do thus,” and “follow so”—walking her to her own doom in the presence of Bal-Balla.

“Deathsman!” she ejaculated, very white and weak from the brief ordeal of having the drug counteracted at a moment when it was taking hold upon her system. “Deathsman! I want no more—will have no more—converse with you. Let me send for that other and heavier purse promised. Then do you begone, by the same means you gained entrance here.”

“Sflames! not yet. A word or so more with you, Lady Perci.”

Relieved of all anxiety for her life, just then, Azhort sat him down again upon the edge of the table, grinning and smirking as before.

Though time was fleeting, and he had much to do before the last boom of the fortress gun that was to signal the outbreak of the conspirators in Venice, he could not forego the jubilant desire to prolong this interview in the red room which evidently tormented a being parallel with himself in wickedness and intrigue.

“But I am weak. I can scarce sit. I must have assistance,” she protested, snappishly, at the same time holding to the side of the sofa to steady herself in a transit of nausea and dizziness.

“Oho! And if I sat here and watched you slowly die, would it be worse than your treatment of Venturi Adello?”

“I know naught of him.”

“Come, thou, woman—we both know better than that. Your life is as an open tablet to me, since you first bargained with me for the robbery and destruction of Rupert Riali, till now. Venturi Adello was admitted to this palace twelve years ago—it was a night of storm, you may recall quite well. He never went from here afterward. On the same night you sought the shop of a chain-forger and worker in metals and ores—his name was Barban. You brought Barban here, and Barban brought his furnace and tools, also a long chain. Oh! Now, what use had you for Barban and his tools, atan hour near midnight, in the Trienti palace, twelve years back? Tell me that?”

“All false—everything you say since your foul shape dared to snail and sneak here! I never knew of a man by the name of Barban.”

“Shall I say to your teeth that you lie?” he exclaimed, scowling. “In the top of this palace there is a prison-cell. Barban, blindfold, was led there—the eyes, mouth, mien of the man seemed mustering their direst energies to appall her. “In the cell there was a man, drugged heavily. You are cunning and practiced in drugs, Lady Perci. Round the waist of the man, and round a column which is up there, you caused Barban to weld a chain. Afterward, in this very room, you plied Barban

with drugs, got him into your gondola, and, when a convenient distance from the palace, you tossed him over to be carried out by the tide.”

Lady Perci grew a trifle whiter. Her scarlet lips were compressed tightly. The words of Azhort searched, tingled and burned into her brain and drove away all vestige of her recent illness from the drug. He was startling her by revealing that he knew more of her life than she dared give to the world, though sustained by money and rank. But she was silent—silent and thoughtful as to how she might deal with this dangerous man.

“Barban, the chain-forger, did not die so easily,” pursued the headsman, after a pause.

And had not Lady Perci such firm control of herself, she would have exclaimed, at this announcement:

“Ah!—did not die, when I filled him to his neck? Then the poison of Vidu's private memorandum—for which I paid the seller an enormous price—was a lie in itself.”

But she said nothing.

“You left him to do his work, in so many hours, alone in the cell. He was through in half the time. Now, a prying knave was Barban. Some hours before you called him from above—he being an apt mechanic and an admirable rascal for getting at secrets—he learned that of which you never dreamed, with all your wit and wisdom: the Trienti palace had as many passages between its walls as on their outside!”

“Ah!” aspirated Lady Perci, becoming doubly intent at this.

“When you thought Barban had finished his task, you summoned him and brought him, again blindfold—and he was, by that time, laughing in his sleeve at your precautions—back to this red room. You had a fine feast prepared for him—oh! a delicious spread!—and a bag of gold on the table. A merry repast of cake, fruit and wine; something like this, no doubt,” and he tapped here and there on the viands beside him. “By umph and by oracle! I see I am interesting you. So. Well, it was: ‘Ha! ha!’ laughed Lady Perci; and: ‘Haw! haw!’ laughed the fool, Barban, sipping and tasting hungrily. Oh! a time of tickles and smiles. And when you had him helpless as a babe, though able to walk, you went arm in arm with the tipsy and poisoned fellow to your gondola. Finally, as I said, you toppled him into the water to drown, and thought that there perished the witness to the fact that you had a chained prisoner in the top of the palace. Ho! what will you say when I tell you that I rescued Barban?—for I was near and watching for the reappearance of Venturi Adello. Barban was nursed by me. He lived long enough to tell me all—the prisoner he chained, your poisoned feast, the secret passages! 'Sflames of Satan! I do not think you will ever secure the treasure of Rupert Riali—for which we made compact years ago—the hiding-place of which is known alone to Venturi Adello. I am satisfied that the man chained to the column is Venturi Adello. I am here, to-night, to see him. The treasure is for me—all mine—ho!”

Then Lady Perci uttered a fierce cry and sprang from the sofa.

Every bold, bad, resentful impulse of her nature surged upward in her heaving, burning bosom. A hundred fiends of mien and strength like Azhort could not have trammeled her now. An expression of consuming fury was molded in her face.

At a few bounds she reached and swung shut the heavy mirror. In a twinkling she had uncoiled the long-lashed whip from her arm, sending it, with one apt twirl, out full length over the carpet toward her enemy.

“Come, deathsman!” she screamed, grasping the short, stout handle with muscles of frenzy and confronting him defiantly.—“Come, we'll play this game to its tragic end! You have discovered that I hold Venturi Adello a prisoner—ay, and he shall continue so; mine only. I know you to be Sadrac, the pirate, on whose head a price was set eighteen years ago. Our battle is between ourselves. We will test if you can so easily wrest from me the treasure of Venturi Adello. Come on, and you will see a trick done with a strange weapon in a woman's gripe. Only over my dead body do you pass here. At one cut of this whip I can sever your devil's head from its trunk! Come! Ha! ha! not yet, deathsman—not yet!”

There is little doubt that Lady Perci, proficient as she was in handling the long-lashed and fearfully sinuous whip, could nearly tear a human head from its body at a single stroke. And even as she shrieked those words in the face of the man whose avowed purpose was to deprive her of a knowledge she had labored for twelve years to obtain from the prisoner of the secret cell, her strong arms had begun to whirl the stock round and round—as we have seen her do once before—and the supple lash was retreating, rising and forming circles above her head, to be let out in its resistless, gun-like snap.

“Satan of flames! Ho! As you say, there are two in this game!” gulped Azhort, sliding nimbly from the table edge.

One of the wine bottles, hurled by his giant's

arm, shot through the air, and before Lady Perci could avoid the missile—enveloped and overbalanced as she was by the hissing coils of the lash—it struck her fairly upon the brow, momentarily stunning her.

She reeled—and once again the iron fingers of the headsman, who leaped forward and upon her with the quickness of lightning, twined around her windpipe.

He forced her backward and down, bringing her head to his knee, holding firmly by the throat with one hand, and with his other hand drew forth the bright-bladed and sharp knife he ever carried.

"Heaven save my soul!" groaned Lady Perci, in her heart; "I am about to be assassinated by the same knife that slew Cladius Alburno at my command."

While he held her helplessly thus, and seemed meditating whether or not to sacrifice her—his posture and glaring eyes both full of horrid menace—there was a loud knock at the door.

"Lady Perci! Lady Perci!" called the voice of Adio Adello.

"Answer him," commanded Azhort, his accents like the warning of a serpent's hiss in the ears of the powerless woman. "Bid him be gone; or, by death and darkness! your life ends in this minute. You have already tempted me too far. Feel of this"—slightly pricking her beneath the chin with the keen point.

"Lady Perci! There—Lady Perci!" called Adio, a second time, thumping louder upon the panel outside.

"What is it, dear Adio?" she managed to reply, shivering as the cold steel weapon touched her flesh.

"Did I not hear you cry out? What has happened?—tell me, I implore. May I not enter for your relief?"

"Oh, if Adio would but come in!" she hoped, in silence, unaware that Azhort had turned the key in the lock.

"Answer," hissed the serpent tongue in her ears.

"An almond-shell, Adio—no more. It has braised my foot through this miserable slipper. Do not enter, nor tarry there. I will see you shortly. I am not much hurt, after all."

Listening to the departing footsteps of Adio Adello, Azhort thrust back his knife into its sheath.

"'Tis well," he said, nodding. "You have saved your life, so far. Now, I shall use this whip to bind your arms and limbs. It will be as well to gag you, also. I wish to preserve you for my wife, Bal-Balla, to deal with. It is not pleasant to treat you thus—degrading for a high and noble lady. But you are sly as a cat and have a wondrous arm. I must guard against your treachery. I shall return directly and bring with me Venturi Adello. For the sake of revenge upon you, when he shall see me give you to my tigress, Bal-Balla, and for his liberty, too, I am sure that he will tell me where to find the treasure-chest."

Whilo speaking, and cutting pieces from the whip, he bound her hand and foot and gagged her securely, then deposited her, in this condition, on the sofa.

"So. There you can abide for awhile. I do not think you can give any outcry or escape me. Now for Venturi Adello." And to himself: "Thunder on high! I vow—by the saints and the gods!—nothing further shall delay me. The Duke d'Ossuna may take it into his wits to sound that third signal from Porto di Lido before midnight!"

Returning to the mirror, he soon found its spring, by reference to Barban's diagram. Entering the niche, relighting the flambeau and drawing the bolts of the iron door, he started upward, leaving Lady Perci impotent in her rage and thrilled by the prospect of some terrible fate at the hands of Bal-Balla, while the ex-chief of executioners proceeded to interview the personage from whom, both his and her ambitious and avaricious dreams had painted, the secret hiding of the treasure of a kingdom might be discovered.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MAN IN THE CELL.

We shall precede Azhort and look in upon the solitary prisoner of the secret cell situated at the extreme top, between the walls, on the front and one corner of the Trienti palace—dressing briefly to relate in what manner he came there.

At the time, previously shown, when Sadrac, the half-Moor pirate, and his ferocious minions attacked the good ship *Unita*, through the instigation of Lady Perci—who had visited the outlaw stronghold in the disguise of a fisher's lad, and received the wound in her neck from Bal-Balla, whose name, then, was Fazienta—the bold, brutal and reckless corsair had been overmatched and repulsed, though in that affray perished Rupert Riali and Lady Anice Adello, and Sadrac, himself, struck Venturi Adello into the sea.

In the heat of conflict, Lady Perci rushed on the deck and, seeing an opportunity to revenge herself for the stab dealt her by Fazienta, grasped an iron bar and jabbed out the

eye of the tigress-woman—who was fighting side by side with her husband—very nearly piercing skull and brain with the same blow.

After returning to the *Unita*, just subsequent to her heinous compact with the pirate chief-tain, Lady Perci overheard a portion of a conversation between her husband and Venturi Adello, discovering to her that the immense treasure—to obtain which she was steeping her soul in crime—had gone by another galleon, and Venturi Adello knew where was to be its secret place of deposit. Had she been in time to catch all that was said, she would have ascertained that one other, besides Adello, possessed the valuable knowledge—that one a grizzled-bearded fisherman on the lower coast of Italy.

Therefore, with the death of Rupert Riali and the apparent drowning of Venturi Adello, she believed that the enormous wealth was lost forever, and was for many days prostrated by this great blow to her ambitious and viperous plots.

Sadrac had contrived to place a spy on board the *Unita* before the vessel started on its homeward voyage. This emissary was, also, a listener when Rupert Riali and Venturi Adello spoke together concerning the treasure. But he heard all, and much more than Lady Perci: that there were two persons in the secret, and one was a fisherman upon the coast toward which the *Unita* was bound. This information he sent to the pirates' retreat, but it arrived too late, and Sadrac did not receive it until after he had returned from his defeat by the brave crew of his intended prey.

On the night before the day, six years later, that she was to be wedded to Marco Trienti—a night of moaning wind and drenching rain—Lady Perci was summoned by a visitor in the room of marble panels and fluted columns, whose message by the page was almost imperative.

The comer's face and form were shadowed and concealed by a broad hat and long cloak, both fairly dripping with wet; but on her appearance he drew these aside, revealing himself to be a man of splendid physique and not unhandsome countenance, perhaps sixty years of age.

At the very first glance, Lady Perci drew back in astonishment and faltered, like a person who sees a ghost.

"Save my soul! Can it be? Am I awake? You are Venturi Adello, back from a grave in the sea?"

"No ghost, Lady Perci," was the deep-voiced response, accompanied by a courteous bow. "It is Venturi Adello, in the flesh. Do you think me greatly altered since last we met?"

"But little. But how were you saved?—and where have you been since that terrible affair on the *Unita*, six years ago?"

"It is a long story, quite," said the visitor. "I have traveled far, and to-night have braved the storm you hear raging without. If we can be more private, I will acquaint you with my experiences and the urgent cause of my coming to the palace under such impatient zest."

She was fairly recovered from the surprise created at seeing here the man who was cut down and thrown overboard by the hand of Sadrac, the pirate, as her own eyes had witnessed. From the very instant she beheld his features, and in a few respirations of time, she thought:

"Oh, heavenly luck! My star of fortune is in the zenith! Here is the man, back in life, who alone knows where to find the vast treasures that once belonged to my husband! Now sustain me, every atom of my wit!—for I do swear that I will get the secret from him, cost what it may! Bless the saints for preserving Venturi Adello!" While aloud she said, gazing momentily into the hall while speaking: "Welcome, dear friend of old. Come with me, and gladly. I am most eager to know by what miracle of Providence you escaped the cutlass of Sadrac and the cold waves of the Adriatic. Ah! your presence recalls a sad event in my life—with a tinge of happiness, nevertheless, in being able thus to clasp the hands of one who was ever a true friend to my lamented husband." And so greeting him, she warmly took his hands in hers, smiling as if thrilled joyously at the meeting.

The maids and servitors of the palace were bustling in anticipation of the event of Lady Perci's marriage on the morrow, gossiping over the magnificent presents flowing in to their mistress or regaling themselves with reviewing the costly decorations with which every apartment of the building was dressed. The attractions for them being, by chance, just then in another portion of the palace—much to the exultation of Lady Perci—she conducted her visitor to the red room without being perceived.

Tapping a small gong on the outside of the door, she ordered refreshment.

Here was inaugurated the mystery in regard to the red room, which, as years elapsed, grew more profound; for she received at the door the various trays and salvers of tempting viands and sparkling wine, and issued low-toned orders that no one should dare, from that date forward, to venture within the chamber.

In the drawer of the luxurious table Lady

Perci kept a number of small and scrupulously-folded papers, some of these white and some of a pink color. They contained the powerful poison of various effects and its antidote, learned from certain private memorandums of Vidus, the Florentine, which she had purchased at fabulous cost, from an avaricious antiquary.

By dextrous manipulation she introduced the potent drug into the brimming flagon of her companion, and as he held the doom to his lips she said, purring:

"Now, good friend Adello, pray tell me all about yourself."

"Before I do that, dear lady, I must put one question. Do not keep me in suspense. What has become of my two children? You may well realize how a father's heart has yearned for them—the more so, because I have never been able to reach Venice till now. Tell me, first of all, where—God grant that they are alive and in health!—where are my two darlings, my boy and girl, my precious Adio and Adria?"

He took a deep draught from the flagon, like a man who has thirsted long.

Lady Perci did not immediately reply to the precipitate interrogation of her visitor.

The question charged her brain with a monstrous idea. Could he have read through the deep, unwinking gaze fixed upon him and measuring him, he might have seen something written and absorbing in her soul like this:

"Ah! I have it. What more potent means could have been placed at my command? This is all I might have desired. Once let me get this dupe into the prison cell shown me six years ago by my husband, Rupert Riali, and I shall bring to bear upon him such biting, heart-tearing influences that he would sooner disclose to me a hundred treasures than permit the sacrifice I can consummate. I will threaten him with the marriage of Adio and Adria—ay, and have the ceremony performed in his sight; for only three persons in the world could bear witness that Adio is not and never was his son: Lady Anice—who is dead; an old fisherman on the lower coast—also dead by this time, I presume, for, of course, the Santo of Venice to-day cannot be the same with whom I dealt twenty-three years ago; lastly, myself. Some such influence must be used, for in that conversation between my husband and Venturi Adello, in the cabin of the *Unita*, I heard Rupert say: 'Adello, my true friend, I have a premonition of harm that is to befall me. In view of it, and for the many services you have rendered me, do not forget that one-half the contents of my treasure-chest is for yourself. I am weary with the cares of business, and if I survive this voyage you and I will have enough of riches for the remainder of our lives. We will live as brothers.' But I have no intention of sharing with Venturi Adello, who will soon be in my power. Another flagon of wine, and he is completely at my mercy."

"Tell me," he asked again, "where are my darling children?"

"Dear friend, have no fears for them; Adria is even now in the palace."

"Heaven be praised! And my boy—Adio?"

"Is with the brother of Lady Anice—Marco Trienti."

"Ah! that I were in more presentable condition. I would beg you, dear lady, to send for Adria."

"Be not too impatient. You shall soon be able to clasp both in your arms. And they will be rejoiced—sweet children!—to receive back from the grave that father of whose virtues I have taught them constantly. How I long to see their faces beam. But wait. You must remain my guest to-night. For I may whisper to you"—smiling like a siren—"that on the morrow I will be wedded to Marco Trienti; and thus, with you and Adio and Adria and a husband to whom I will be devoted, the palace will be a most happy abiding-place. Let me help you to more wine"—leaning forward and replenishing the flagon so gracefully that he scarce dared decline. "And do not forget that I am consuming to learn the detail of your wonderful escape from death by the hand of Sadrac, the half-Moor pirate."

"True, I owe that duty to my presence first. To-morrow will do to see my children. Your health, Lady Perci. And when I have finished, it would be pleasant to hear something of yourself and how your betrothal with Marco Trienti transpired."

"We shall exchange two widely different histories, I am sure."

"To begin: when I was stricken from the deck of the *Unita*—"

He said no more than this.

The second flagon of wine had been drained; it suddenly slipped from his grasp and rolled upon the floor. Every nerve, from head to sole, seemed stiffening. His lips, tongue and throat grew parched; a noise like the roar of tumbling, foaming waters filled his head; his vision dimmed.

"What—what is this?" he gurgled, brokenly. "What has come over me? It seems like poison in my stomach—in my veins. I burn. Ha! Lady Perci! Treachery!—and for what? I—"

Then his chin sunk to his breast, his eyelids closed, and the drug had done its work.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Lady Perci, exultantly. "What care I how you escaped the cutlass of Sadrac or the waves of the Adriatic! Enough that you are Venturi Adello, that you know where the treasure can be found, and that you are in my power!"

We have spoken of the unusual strength of Lady Perci's arms. On the night of this deed, with the advantage of twelve years of youth, she was even more muscular. Exerting herself to her utmost, she dragged her victim to the secret prison cell, and then, while yet panting from the effort, sought Barban, a chain-forger and worker in ores and metals. When Barban, at her order, welded a chain round the waist of the prisoner and round the smooth column in the cell, she invited him to complete the repast which the operation of the drug had interrupted.

What followed may be divined from the speeches of Azhort in the brief interview which he forced upon Lady Perci in the red room, twelve years subsequent to his rescue of Barban from the canal.

The ensuing day had nearly waned, and Lady Perci was the wife of Marco Trienti, ere the unlucky captive awoke to his harrowing surroundings, and for weeks the fiend jailer feared that his reason was hopelessly gone, as she listened, at the small grating of the iron door to his violent gibbering and incoherent raving.

But the brain asserted its function at last, and then she began to say, regularly, as she brought him food:

"Tell me, Venturi Adello, where I will find the treasure-chest of Rupert Riali—if you have not squandered it, which I do no deem likely."

"I am not Venturi Adello!"

"Foolish man! Answer, if you would regain your liberty."

"I swear that I am not Venturi Adello, but an accused fool that I ever personated him! I know nothing of the treasure!" he protestingly howled a score of times.

"Aha! it will not avail you to be obstinate. If you do not tell me, and truly, you will never come out of there alive. More, I will bring before you Adio and Adria—your own children—and a priest shall wed them. They know not that they are brother and sister. Think upon that, and save them from such shame."

In vain he vowed, by all the saints, that he was not Venturi Adello and denied the knowledge of the whereabouts of Rupert Riali's treasures.

Years went by. His beard grew to his waist, his nails were like bird-claws, his hair tangled in fast-whitening tresses. And almost incessantly he was given to wild screams and crazy mutterings that never penetrated to mortal ears save when, at the quiet of night, he would place his mouth to the small, round, telescopic opening far up in the palace wall and send forth that half-smothered, prolonged and ghostly "hallo-o-o!" which wrought upon the superstition of many in the vicinity of the canal of Isle Murano and caused the minds of the more intelligent to marvel greatly.

Lady Perci had specially manufactured that long-lashed and terrible whip, and practiced with it until, at will, she could stand within the entrance of the cell and deal the poor wretch a blow that ripped and tore through the tatters of cloth and into his flesh when he fled to the utmost of his chain.

Twice a year, upon certain days, she would thus cut at him, delivering at each time but one blow, and upon each occasion saying:

"Are you ready, now, to tell me what I wish to know?"

For several years she had not inflicted this outrage, and it was fortunate for her that she had no further occasion to enter his cell.

In the latter part of his confinement his body had so fallen away and his bones so limbered that it was an easy matter to slip off the finely-woven circle of links that belted his waist. Then, like some hungered and cunning beast, still wearing the chain, he waited for an opportunity to seize his tormentor; for, though free of the chain at option, he could not reach out and down, through the movable wicket, to the heavy bolts at the bottom and outside of the iron door.

"Oh! Oh!" he would grind from his gritting teeth, time and again. "I will yet have her change places with me. Yes. And I shall feed her as she did me—on poison!—poison! Ha! ha!"

It was in one of these, or some such frenzy of utterance, that—animated to insanity by the nourished prospect of revenge—he fairly shrieked the word: "POISON!" And this happened on the night and in the instant that Adria was about to partake of the drugged grapes, and as the plug of the microphonic-tube fell out in the red room below—his chains shaking and clanking simultaneously in a convulsion of frantic gayety.

Shortly succeeding this, and while pacing to and fro in the darkness of his prison, he heard the lower and middle iron doors open, and a sound of footsteps on the thick and narrow wooden stairs.

Slipping his chain, he ran to the door and crouched low down under the wicket.

"Oh! Oh! she comes—the accursed Lady Perci! Why have I never thought of this before? I will reach out and grasp her hair. I will hold her till, with her foot, she raises the bolts which I know are along the bottom of this door. Freedom to-night—freedom! Ha! ha! And she!—I will first scratch out her eyes with these long nails, then leave her here to starve, die, rot!—or feed her on poison, as she did me!"

He shook like a wind-ruffled leaf.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF AZHORT.

THE footsteps on the secret stairs ascended rapidly.

The form of the prisoner shrunk lower and his hands, with nails like claws, worked itchingly in their impatience to dart upward and gripe the hair of Lady Perci as she opened and presented at the small wicket, according to custom, a supply of victuals intended to suffice for twenty-four hours.

But the comer was not Lady Perci.

The rays of a flambeau illuminated the interior of the cell, and a coarse, guttural voice exclaimed:

"Ho, in there! Venturi Adello! Show yourself to me!"

There was a shrill yelp of surprise from within, and a corpse-like, cadaverous visage, with the eyes of a lunatic, pressed close to the grating, staring incredulously at Azhort.

Even the headsman, inured as he was to the curdling sights of the ducal dungeons, retreated a step and flared forward the flambeau, as if to ward off an expected pounce from the frightful shape.

"Who art thou?" barked the prisoner.

"Azhort, the deathsman of Venice."

"Oh! Oh! And you are here to lead me to my execution. Well, take me out. The bolts are at your feet. Quick. If I am only to escape by death, then better so. Twelve long years—twelve—I have been caged in here. Come, out with me. Welcome, axman. Open the door."

"Not so fast, Venturi Adello. True, I am here to take you away, but not to death, and only on one condition. Light in darkness! Promise to tell me where the treasure-chest of Rupert Riali is concealed, then I will liberate you and we will share it. You shall have revenge upon Lady Perci who has, I know, kept you locked up for twelve years. Talk fast, now. Is it a bargain?"

"Revenge, you say? Ha! that is what I want most of all. Draw the bolts at the bottom of the door—"

"Pest! Answer first; will you lead me to the treasure?"

"But I know of none—that is, I do not know where it is. Lady Perci has asked me the same question for twelve years, and because I could not answer, my back is striped and sore from the lash. She, too, takes me to be Venturi Adello. I am not he. Curses on the hour in which I ever personated him! Let me out. Oh! Oh! free me and let me get at Lady Perci! Haste!"

"What do you mean by denying that you are Venturi Adello?" demanded Azhort, scowling. "Come, you have suffered enough, I think, for this same stubbornness. Here is a chance for liberty and revenge. Speak."

"Think you I would withhold a million treasures if they could buy my freedom?" wailed the miserable being. "Lady Perci has threatened to marry the son and daughter of Venturi Adello if I do not inform her as she wishes—and I cannot. Were I their father, would I let treasure, or aught else, be the cause of such a shame? No. I am not Venturi Adello, hear me swear! Let me out, now!"

"Dragons of flames! If not Venturi Adello, who, then, are you?"

"Years of torture have almost caused me to forget who I am. But I was once called Oberek, and I served as a corsair in the Mediterranean. Oh! Oh! will you draw those bolts?"

The dark heart of the headsman fairly lumped in his throat. He snarled a dreadful oath, beat his breast, tore at his raven hair and shook the flambeau furiously aloft.

"Ho! Thunders and fire! Fury and guns! You are not Venturi Adello, but Oberek, who served in my own crew as a spy eighteen years ago. Misfortune of the Evil One! And I am Sadrac. I could tear you asunder joint from joint! My dreams—my dreams of treasure are lost! Ho! I shall go mad after this! My curse on you!" and for a few seconds he was unearthly to behold in his paroxysm of disappointment and rage.

"Oh, yes!" howled the prisoner. "Now that I am used to the torch, and as I look closer, I know you to be Sadrac, once my pirate chief. I remember your eyes—eyes that could almost destroy. Get me out of this, in return for the risk I ran for you by playing spy on the Unita eighteen years ago."

"Tell me how you could deceive Lady Perci into believing that you were Venturi Adello?" hoarsely thundered the enraged Azhort, quivering in the excitement produced by this cold

dash upon his long and avaricious dream of treasure-finding.

"That is an easy matter. In the fight on the Unita, I had to leap into the sea, for I was detected in wetting the powder and had but a moment in which to save my skull from a truncheon. I caught at a spar. To the other end of this spar clung Venturi Adello, dying from a sword-wound across his head. When, at last, he did die, I rifled his pockets and let him sink. I had studied his whole appearance, and saw that, in all but my beard, I resembled him much. After my rescue I went to France and set about preparing myself for the society in which I had determined to mingle—for, aided by the valuable papers I secured while afloat on the spar, and a slight similarity of personal appearance, I intended to present myself in Venice as Venturi Adello and the father of his children. I knew a great deal of his private affairs, which I learned on the Unita. When I had brought myself to look more like Venturi Adello and was nicely mannered, I knew I must have some convenient wealth, and so went in search of a certain fisherman on the lower coast—"

"Thou dog, Oberek! So, you desired that wealth which your chief failed to secure? Then there has been a trio after the chest of Rupert Riali: Lady Perci, Oberek and Sadrac. Now—fire of the fiends!—who is to get it, since you say Venturi Adello was drowned? When your missive reached me from the Unita—too late to have saved the lives of many of my crew from a useless battle—you mentioned that fisherman on the lower coast as the second and last person on earth knowing where was the hidden treasure. But you did not give his name."

"Oh! Oh! I can do so now, if it will avail you. But when I went to the place, he had disappeared. No one could tell where he had gone. He must be dead ere this."

"His name—dog?"

"I remember in the talk between Adello and Riali, in the cabin of the Unita, they called him by the name of 'Santo.'"

A shout burst from the lips of the headsman.

"Santo! Ho! Santo, you say?"

"Yes, that was it. Let me out, now. Draw the bolts."

"So, it is not lost yet!" Azhort laughed, hoarsely. "I am in better humor! Santo, the fisherman! He lives, and I can find him!"

"Let me out!" whined Oberek, rattling the wicket in his skinny hands.

Azhort kicked up the bolts and turned to descend. His ears were instantaneously saluted by an infuriated yell, and the ghostly prisoner, now released, dashed down past him, clawing the air like a very madman.

"Stay there—fool! If you show yourself in the palace you will be pierced by half a dozen lances!"

Oberek sped heedlessly on, seeking nothing and recking for naught save some deadly vengeance upon the woman who had held him incarcerated for twelve years and marked his ragged back with welts from the long-lashed whip.

"That mad-dog will make short work with Lady Perci, whom I left gagged and bound!" growled Azhort, quickly following the insane creature. "Destruction on my folly! why d.d I not close the mirror? I want Lady Perci for the vengeance of Bal-Balla. The palace will now be aroused before the third signal gun from Porto di Lido, and that will not suit me; for in the *mélée*—when the bravos rise—I intend to carry the pretty Lady Adria to my gondola. I know that Tobato will not fail to be at the landing. Plague! I may not be able to see Santo, the fisherman, until after the riot and pillage. Beak of Beelzebub!—halt, lunatic! I cannot overtake the rascal!"

But in binding and gagging Lady Perci, the ex-chief of executioners had no ordinary captive to deal with. Within a few minutes after his departure upward, she rolled from the sofa and, on her knees—her ankles being fettered—worked her herself sideways toward the door.

"Not yet, thou over-calculating and abominable deathsman!" filled the quickness of her fancy, together with a mode conceived for her own release. "Give me but a few moments, and I will be free in time to imprison you with Venturi Adello. You shall starve in the secret cell! I think I know what you meant by saying that I would be powerless to injure any one a few hours hence. Aha! we shall see."

Both knob and key were above her reach when she finally maneuvered to a standing posture with her back to the door.

Then she stooped and inserting her nose in the loop of the key, easily turned it round in the lock. Again she stooped, this time pressing her right eye against the knob. This knob was small, angular on the circumference and roughly embellished at the edges. In the cavity of her face formed by the combined nasal, superior maxillary and superior orbital bones, and by a firm contraction of the flesh of the cheek, Lady Perci obtained a hold upon the knob, succeeding, in a few trials, in turning it. As the latchet clicked and the door jarred slightly from the frame, she once more used her nose, this time as a prier, forcing

the door wide—and thus, with eyes and nose, she opened her way from the red room.

To her surprise, she stood face to face with Adio Adello.

Adio had changed his attire. He was belted around shoulders and waist; his hands were gloved with knuckles of steel; he wore a dagger and stout sword, and on his head a cap with the ancient green and black war plumes of the Trienti.

"My dear Lady Perci, I would not intrude, but something of stirring importance demands—" he was hastening to say, then paused, staring in amazement at her gagged mouth and tied wrists.

Before he could make a motion to relieve her, or ask the cause of her astonishing plight, a wild screech rung piercingly through the room and Oberek—his great eyes protruding from their sunken sockets and talon fingers clutching and tearing at the air—burst forth from the aperture in the wall, which Azhort had neglected to close.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE STROKE OF THE SPY.

WHILE the events of the last eleven chapters progressed within the Trienti palace, other scenes, equally important, were transpiring outside.

It had seemed to the spangle-tight and ugly young dwarf, Tobato—as he rowed his father, the headsman, from their "fort" to the landing at the residence of the senator—that the black gondola did not respond to his exertions at the oar with its customary celerity; for, though small and misshaped of figure, and with the disadvantage that the oar was too cumbersome for him, Tobato's strength, owing to constant and severe devotion to gymnastic exercises, nearly equaled that of a more perfectly developed man.

Considering that he had earned his "tubful of spangles and a dozen suits," by hastening to deliver his evil-browed though reverenced parent at the palace stair, he now sculled carelessly along picturing in mind the ship with its Barbary crew and a pirate flag, himself a prince in glittering spangles and the beautiful Adria for his bride.

"Hi! How delicious!" he crowed, in a half-whisper, looking up at the high-sailing moon as if he saw there a vision of the happiness promised him in future. "Hi! Hi! What a splendid finish I will make as a pirate, small as I am, next in command to my smart father! How I shall cut, slash and plunder the merchantmen! And Adria, my blooming bride, decked out in jewels of a princess! Adorable Adria! How my heart thumps when I think of her. I never knew I had such a loving heart until I saw Adria. Peerless Adria! She shall have a couch with down from the swan; a coronet of diamonds big as eggs of a dove; sandals of solid gold; a wardrobe from the best makers in Europe. She shall lead the life of a houri, with music of angels to delight her ears and breezes of perfume and amours to fan her cheek. Oh, none shall dare to look at her but myself. I will sing to her, play for her, fight and bleed for her, dance for her so—so—so"—capering like a monkey on the narrow deck. "Hi! It will be roses and love and heaven for us both, dear heart. Unsurpassable Adria! But what can be the matter with this boat, I wonder?" as he noticed that the generally light-floating and speedful gondola dragged heavier than ever, and putting greater effort into his oar.

"I am sure that my smart father will secure Adria for me," continued the gay-toned Tobato, to himself. "He always succeeds in whatever he undertakes. Oh, but it would rend my soul in twain if I did not get the charming maid for a wife. I must not imagine such woe. Only one thing I dread: that masquerading gondolier in our house. He heard and, no doubt, understood all. He knows that we are plotting to abduct Adria—my lovely, dark-eyed Adria! What if he should inform, and such a cordon of watchfulness then be placed about her, that neither plot nor force be able to reach her? Miserable thought!—let me banish it. Hi! but I would give a ton of spangles to catch that spy, now, swimming; to tap him on the head, first gently, then a little harder, then—"

While saying this last aloud, Tobato took his gaze from the moon and looked searchingly around for the floating head of the spy who had dived from the landing at the "deathsman's fort."

And while the words were yet upon his lips, there was a splash and ripple behind him and a pair of hands, with the gripe of a vise, fell upon him, shoulder and limb.

Up he went, high and upon nothing, then outward with a force that hurled him several yards from the gondola.

Tobato uttered a sharp cry while in midair, and another when he rose, like a duck, to the surface of the water; and when he dashed the spray from his astounded eyes, he saw the black gondola shooting swiftly away, leaving him to swim for his life.

When Piero dived, as the reader will remember, from the stair at Azhort's abode on the northernmost isle of the New Lazaretto, he was

too shrewd to rise and strike out from the place, knowing that father and son would instantly and eagerly seek for him and undoubtedly beat out his brains as he swam in such a defenseless position.

Turning under water, he came up at the stern of the steel-prowed gondola—which, unlike the usual gondola, only had one prow—and there he clung during the trip to the palace, his weight retarding the motion, until, swinging himself adroitly to the deck, he grasped and cast the execrable dwarf headlong overboard, exclaiming, angrily:

"So! By St. Mark! You would like to tap me gently at first, then a little harder, and so on until my head was effectually split, I suppose. Take a bath, thou ape!—and thank the cherubs that I do not throttle you instead. Audacious chip from a Satanic trunk!—to dare such language of one who is the betrothed of Cladius Alburno! Drown there, and Venice is rid of one poisonous spider, I vow. Now, then, to find my beloved commander, the brave Cladius, if he be in the land of the living. I heard wolfshead, the headsman, say that there was no blood upon his knife, and I know that my commander, Cladius, put on an under-jacket of mail this very morning. If the knife of the assassin did not find his vitals then all may be well, for I know him to be a most excellent swimmer."

Piero had been sufficiently rapid of movement to catch the oar before it slid over the side, and, plying this with his vigorous arm, he turned the prow of the gondola toward the principality of Venice.

So intent and anxious was he to reach Cladius Alburno, if that person should be alive, that he did not notice a dark streak or low-setting and thin-shaped something following close in his rear.

It was a sharp, water-rimmed skiff, and in the skiff sat and rowed the second spy who had been caught eavesdropping at the door of Azhort's home, the same who had tried to sell the rawboned dog, in an earlier chapter, to Adio Adello. Evidently he was dogging Piero—as we shall still designate that person—and his two-bladed oar was still bringing him closer, notwithstanding the swiftness of the steel-prowed gondola.

"I trust I will not be recognized," was the hope of Piero, as he tied the gondola to a ring at the landing footing a cramped and poorly-lighted street, and then hurried forward on foot. "That monkey son of the ex-chief of executioners had keen eyes. He has robbed me of hat, wig and whiskers. Dogs of mischief! Had they found me out sooner I am sure that Azhort's ax, and his wife's claws, and his son's clown-grinning jaws, would have sundered me in shreds and particles. But it is not far to the house of Santo, the fisherman, and with this thick collar—stiff with wet, and I am dripping as if from a shower-bath—it is not likely that I will be known. If there is to be an attempt to pillage Venice—as I know from what I have heard—by St. Mark! what better opportunity for my beloved commander, Cladius Alburno, to distinguish himself and prove, by heroic service, that he is still a friend to the conspiracy-tossed Republic. Come, it was fortunate, rather, that I so recklessly entered the den of Azhort—though I pretty near lost my valuable head when he began practicing with his devilish ax, and all three went wild over the prospect of burning, killing, plundering and the like. But let me think of nothing, now, save seeking Cladius Alburno— Ha! I thought I saw a shadow cast before me."

He half-paused and looked back.

Close behind him, darting, jumping, skulking and gaining quickly, was the spy occupant of the skiff, whose feet appeared to be incased in soft woolens, so noiseless and catlike was his tread.

Thinking and mumbling, Piero went fast over the ground that lay between the landing and the home of Santo, the fisherman, where he knew Cladius Alburno could be found, if Providence had permitted his escape from the stabbing knife of Azhort in the affray on the Grand Canal at sunset.

"In such times," he pursued, seeing nothing in his rear—for the wily spy was quick enough to avail himself of the shadows of overhanging lattices—"In such times, one may fancy, with a ban upon him, that everything is suspicious. But I am almost certain I saw a following shadow on these stones before me. Pah! The unjust outlawry of the Council is making a coward of me—I, who have fought a dozen battles."

At a corner Piero passed into another street, darker than the first. As he turned, his toe struck a stone, causing him to stumble awkwardly.

That stumble probably saved his life. For as he half-wheeled and pitched forward, a stinging sensation of cold steel in the shoulder wrung a cry of pain from his lips.

Simultaneously came an exulting, savage voice—the voice of the dogging and assassin spy, as this party ran off in the gloom.

"Ah! How is that, duplicate dog! Cladius Alburno died to-day on the Grand Canal. You

are Doldric, the Dane, second officer in command of the war-ship of Cladius Alburno. Ah! Two traitors in a few hours. So strikes The Ten. This for you because you followed an outlawed chief!"

Piero, wounded and bleeding, staggered to his feet, knife in hand, prepared for a second attack.

"By St. Mark! Assassin!" he hissed, scarce above his breath. "If your cowardly thrust is fatal, I only pray that I may have strength enough to reach the house of Santo, the fisherman, and tell what I know!"

And perceiving that he was alone, and no further assault imminent, he reeled onward, though holding his weapon ready.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CLADIUS AND THE MARKET-BOY.

We must look after Cladius Alburno, who, it will be remembered, pitched headlong into the Grand Canal upon receiving those two furious stabs from the knife of Azhort, with every appearance of having been fatally wounded.

The blows delivered by the headsman, in the brief encounter on the forward and narrow deck of the black gondola, were direly meant; but fortunately for Cladius, he had that very morning donned—in yielding to the earnest solicitation of his trusty officer, Doldric, the Dane, heretofore known as Piero, the gondolier—an under-jacket of intricately woven steel.

Though the knife-blade penetrated apparently to the hilt in his breast, its force was downward, harmlessly glancing on the surface of the mail.

Why Cladius should have uttered the cry and precipitated himself into the canal, is explained in a few words.

Though a bold leader and intrepid warrior, and filled with indignation at the high-handed assault, his nature was one that never lost its coolness and keen perception in a moment of peril. No sooner did he find himself in the powerful arms of Azhort, comprehend the other's fiercely-hissed words, and experience the strokes of the knife on his breast, than through his brain flashed the following quick thought:

"It is discovered that I am not Santo, but Cladius Alburno in the guise of Santo! Here is an opportunity to have it believed that I am assuredly dead!" and simultaneously uttering what was mistaken for a cry of mortal agony, he flung himself into the water.

For full three minutes he remained beneath the surface swimming from the spot.

At that hour there were numerous craft upon the canal, and the affair had been witnessed by many boatmen who, in mere curiosity, sculled forward, to the scene of what had appeared to them to be an assassination, though none had heard the shout of Azhort that would have proclaimed the identity of his victim.

The black gondola and the gondola of Lady Perci were speeding away when Cladius arose within arm's length of a market-boat. He raised and cast himself into this so suddenly that he was lying prone in the bottom almost before his presence was realized.

The boat had but one occupant—a stout lad yet in his teens—and at the unexpected intrusion, with its accompanying strange behavior, he called out, somewhat gruffly:

"Heigho, there! Who are you?"

"Silence, honest friend," said Cladius, drawing a purse from his saturated pocket. "Take this, and be for a time in my service. First, cover me with something, that I may not be seen. I have had a most narrow escape."

"Oh, if my eyes do not lie to me—and it was quite a way off—you are the same who was struck, just now, by Azhort, ex-chief of the executioners"—promptly taking up the purse cast at his feet. "This is good pay for so small a service. What next, now?"

"I will see that you have another purse, lad, if you will bring me to the street where lives Santo, the fisherman," offered Cladius, from beneath the market-smelling bags and cloths which the young fellow was carelessly, though with ready wit, piling promiscuously upon him.

"A bargain, signore. Why, this is luck enough for many days. I am not a fool to miss earning two such purses, for they will gladden both the eyes and stomach of my old mother. We have not seen so much money since my father was killed."

"How did your good father die, lad?" inquired Cladius, under the rags.

"Oh, he was shot in battle. A true sailor, signore."

"And what is your name?"

"I am called, simply, Staffo. My father's name was Staffo Montello. He belonged to the crew of the High-Watch, the war-ship of Cladius Alburno. That ship is to leave to-night with the tide, convoying a wealthy galleon. How I have wished, all this day, that I was going with the High-Watch, and that I might have the great Captain Cladius for my commander—"

"Careful—careful. Remember that Cladius Alburno has been pronounced a traitor. Therefore, for your own good, speak not too well of him."

"I have never heard much of his particular treason," avowed Staffo; "but all Venetia is

familiar with his bravery and patriotism. What did he do?"

"Of all people in the world, I cannot answer that, my lad. Do you believe that he was a traitor?"

"Come, what a question—whatever you are—after cautioning me to beware how I speak of Captain Cladius."

"I knew Staffo Montello intimately. I have fought by his side," said Cladius, who was still wary of discovering himself. "He was a firm friend of mine; true as steel. Cladius Alburno valued him highly."

"Then you, too, were on the High-Watch," put Staffo, eagerly.

"I may say yes to that. And since the action of the Council, banning Cladius Alburno, I have lost my employment. Then you have never seen this captain, my lad?"

"Why, I wish I could!"

"In what manner?—friend or foe?"

"Not as his foe; I am unworthy even for that. But you seem as willing as I to talk of the outlawed commander. Are you his friend?"

"What if I answer yea?"

"Why?" laughed young Staffo. "It is plain that we are beating about a bush; and since we cannot trust one another, I am sorry. I would like to see him and let him question me."

"Perhaps you will meet with him some day, when he is restored to his full honors, and I will take pains to speak of your admiration for him. But hasten, now, and fetch me to the home of Santo, the fisherman."

Silence ensued. Cladius fell to ruminating upon his unpleasant situation, not unmixed with thoughts of Adria and how this would affect her; for she must have seen all, and, like others, reasonably believe him dead. He was worried greatly, and at a loss to conceive how now to communicate with her.

It was far from agreeable for a man accustomed to command warriors brave as himself, to lie thus upon the wet, smelling bottom of a dirty boat, hiding, under filthy rags, from people and the light of the world like hunted prey—even in the emergency of promulgating a judicious illusion of his death. Humiliating, indeed, for this hero of a score of battles against pirates which even before his time, and up to the date of war with Sultan Ibrahim, in 1645, infested the Adriatic. His soul revolted at a contemplation of the part he was acting, but inward counsel prevailed, and he remained a motionless martyr with burning cheeks.

Fortunately for Cladius, he had placed himself in the hands of one who, though never having seen him, was a friend if for no other reason than an intense admiration of his deeds of daring and startling record in the annals of recent naval victories.

The silken purse he had given to Staffo was a trifling *souvenir* from Adria, received just prior to his last and sadly-terminating voyage; worked by her own skill, and on the bottom two deftly-woven letters in fine gold thread: "C. A."—the initials of the hero she adored.

Without pausing to remember the danger attending, and only eager to purchase a quick, safe transit to the home of Santo, the fisherman, Cladius had now bestowed the telltale purse upon the market-boy.

The shrewd eyes of Staffo riveted by turns on the two initials and the outlines of the form concealed beneath his old rags and bags. There was a fertile reasoning in him that recalled every word exchanged by himself and the secreted passenger, and finally he soliloquized:

"Heigho! What if these two letters signify 'Cladius Alburno,' the very one we have been speaking about? I mind, now, that he is of splendid muscle and bold, handsome face. And common people do not spend money by the heavy purseful. Such an interest he seemed to take, too, in Staffo Montello, my father, and his illustrious captain. Come, I shall follow him—for it will be night by the time I reach the street where lives Santo, the fisherman, and I can easily do that. If it be the great Cladius himself, he must take back his silver or allow me to perform a deeper service to earn it. As my father admired and fought for Cladius Alburno, so would I; for I have never believed him to be a traitor at all!"

It was well that Staffo resolved to follow and know more about the personage in his boat, as the sequel proved.

Arriving at the landing of a remote and lane-like street, Cladius bade the youth follow him and obtain his promised reward.

It was fully night, and convenient shadows rendered the way less perilous to the person of Cladius, whose face—having lost hat and false beard—was wholly exposed.

Staffo kept willingly at his heels; for, with closer scrutiny of his companion's features, by occasional rays of the moonlight, he mumbled in an undertone:

"If he be not Cladius Alburno, then he must be some one near to that famous captain—an officer, perhaps, who chooses to share his exile. See how proudly he steps. I am determined to know more about him, for he's of no common sort, at least—"

"Here we are, my faithful lad," said Cladius, tarrying soon at a neat abode having a low-built

and latticed window, the top of which terminated in a pointed peak against the wall. "Here we are. You will not have long to wait for your pay and thanks for this favor. Tarry awhile." And, reaching upward, he rattled peculiarly at the casement.

Some one must have been on the look-out, for the door was not long in being opened. And as Cladius stepped in, and the light streamed forth, and before the door was closed, Staffo saw an old, grizzly-bearded man and his sharply-pricked ears caught the low, pleased exclamation:

"Ah! Cladius, my son. Heaven be praised that you are again safe with me!"

The market-boy smote his hip and leaped twice from the ground, balancing himself on one leg.

"Heigho!" he breathed in delight. "I am not wrong. It is Cladius Alburno, captain of all captains, and already I am in his service. This will be tremendous news for my old mother when she hears that I saved the outlawed commander of my father, brave Staffo Montello, from assassination on the Grand Canal. Wonderful news!"

And he braced himself to tender further services when Cladius should return with the second purse.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SCRAP FROM EARLIER YEARS.

THE home of Santo, the fisherman, had an unusually comfortable appearance for a man of his lowly calling.

But though notoriously active in that pursuit in his younger days, and still widely known as Santo, the fisherman, many years had passed since this important character to our story had cast a net or hauled a line.

When Santo came to Venice to live permanently, sixteen years earlier than this date, or thereabouts, he brought with him a buxom wife and a boy child apparently five years old—this occurring about two years subsequent to the event of the attack upon the ship *Unita*, by Sadrac, the half-Moor pirate, and the concomitant deaths of Rupert Riali, Venturi Adello and the latter's wife, Lady Anice.

The house he now occupied was of quite ancient and dilapidated architecture at that time—sixteen years back—and being for sale at a very reasonable figure he purchased it.

Santo owned several boats and employed as many assistants to work them, and these were supposed to be his sole source of income; his list of patrons being very liberal and his habits sober, industrious and frugal.

He would, however, disappear mysteriously upon a certain day, once in each year, and on each occasion of his return, after nearly a month of absence, it was remarked that he in some way embellished either the interior or exterior of his dwelling; until, at last, it would be a byword:

"What a thriving dog is Santo!"

"Take pattern by Santo, my children!"

"Save your money, sons and daughters, like Santo, if you would get rich!"

While Santo, as he and his wife ornamented and made comfortable their surroundings, would say together:

"Let us not forget, dear heart, that while Providence permits us to partake of the enjoyments herein, they are not ours, but are for the sake of the boy whom God has intrusted to us."

In a few years Santo's wife died, but not until their boy had grown old enough to care for himself and be of vast assistance in taking charge of the boats whose number and the income from which yearly increased.

This boy had always been considered an offspring of the couple, and if he was or not, they never made any one the wiser. He was called simply "young Santo," and at the age of twelve years evinced a noble spirit of self-reliance which caused the old man exceeding pride.

But when his wife was entombed and the boy had reached this age, and after returning from one of those mysterious absences with the invariable supply of money, Santo laid his hand upon the youth's shoulder, and said:

"My son, give an attentive ear to what I am now speaking, for though little, it means much. I have been a father to you since you drew the first strong breath of life. You are growing fast in years. It has been my labor to make this home fit for such as you; for I tell you that you were born for far better things. You are noble in youth—you must be grand in manhood. Do now as I bid you, and ask no questions, however singular my words may seem. I am obeying the orders of one whom I have served as faithfully dead as if he were living. Go far from here into the world, where none may know you or that you were ever in my charge. Keep my name silent as the grave. If in need of funds, communicate with me; but use carefully what I give you, and avoid temptations of evil. May the good God be with you in every deed, for you must not return until you have won deserved fame. In that time, come back to me and I will have a wonderful secret to reveal—remember, a secret to fix your whole future. Heaven grant that we may

both be preserved! You have never really had a name. I now christen you CLADIUS ALBURNO. Honor it. And go, now, my son—go."

The newly-named boy departed from the shelter of his childhood; not to taste of the prodigal pleasures of the world, but with the old man's tender and hopeful words ringing in his ears, and his expanding mind set upon one great and honorable purpose.

Santo frequently heard from him, and anon he was pleased to learn that the boy had selected the perils of the navy for his ambition.

A gloom settled over the now desolate home of the honest fisherman, and this redoubled when, finally, all trace of his young idol was lost.

But Cladius was not wasting his hours nor his years. Severe study, close habits and unconquerable resolution soon enabled him to pay for his own advancements; and at the time when Santo had almost given him up for dead, he was cruising under a foreign commission, and rendering efficient service to an adopted government.

Fortune cannot withhold her favors from such men, and in the course of time he had become so valuable that the great merchants of many seaport cities had combined in convention, persuaded him to resign, then built and presented to his command a magnificent war-ship, floating an independent, international flag, to be devoted in the cause of protection for all maritime powers against the pirates that horrified the Adriatic and Mediterranean seas in the first half of the seventeenth century.

Then indeed did the wonderful skill and prowess of the self-made chieftain glow forth, as he trod his own proud deck, with a worshiping crew, and swept and swooped hither and thither, governed solely by his inclination and experience, until his vessel became a terror to lawless depredators, and its name, High-Watch, circulated on the four winds.

The Venetian Government could not passively observe a leader so valorous, and a ship so stanch cruising thus independently from sea to sea. Ever greedy to secure a valuable ally in its own interests, it at once conceived a desire to enlist the hero in their own navy, and to that end dispatched envoys to him with rich offers.

After many refusals, Cladius at last yielded to the princely inducements, being further influenced by a wish near to his heart to once more make Venice his home. Much money and considerable diplomacy availed in purchasing the notable High-Watch, and Cladius, with his own tried crew, swore allegiance to the rulers of Venice.

The news of the acquisition spread like sparks from a volcano, and when the High-Watch entered its new harbor, with a new flag and gaudy streamers fluttering to the breeze, all Venice, from Chioggia to Torcello, rung with loud applause for Cladius Alburno. It was a gala day, with royal demonstration, decorated shipping, a salute from the arsenal, and a banquet at the ducal palace.

But above all, who can conceive the abundance of joy that thrilled the bosom of Santo, the fisherman, when he heard the name of the boy he had nourished and started upon a career so fraught with heroic glory? For a while he was on the verge of insanity from very gladness; and tears on his withered cheeks, and prayers from the innermost depths of his bound in heart attested his thanks to that Heaven which had fulfilled the hope of his life.

But Santo kept himself in the background, contented with feasting his eyes upon the pomp and homage at the command of Cladius, and widening his ears to tales of the famous doings of the High-Watch chattered from every tongue, and no one ever guessed of the strong tie existing between the distinguished commander and the humble fisherman.

"He will not forget me, be sure of that," smiled the old man, in his blissful soul. "Oh, no; he will not forget Santo. He will come at the right time and get my embraces. For I know that Cladius had a heart too big to be turned from me, even by excess of renown. Yes, he will come."

And Santo was right. At an early opportunity Cladius came in all the splendor of his glittering uniform and decorations of honor, accompanied by his first officer, Doldric, the Dane.

"See!" he cried, with emotion. "Has your boy done well?"

The two threw themselves into each other's arms and wept.

What a happy day for honest Santo!

They did not dream, in this hour of transport, how soon the star of Cladius would darkle in the bane of Lady Perci's hate when she should discover the attachment which shortly sprung to fervor between him and Adria. And when that fell blow came, the home of Santo was his haven—Santo, who shed tears of woe, and whom alone he could trust in a great city that had once fairly begged the services of his sword.

Greater men than Cladius had tasted bitterly of the treacherous and fluctuating humors of the Republic.

And now to resume at the instant when the outlawed and nearly disheartened chieftain was admitted to the abode of his true and fatherly

friend, after his adventures on the Grand Canal and the prompt service rendered him by Staffo, the market-boy.

CHAPTER XX.

SANTO UNWINDS HIS SECRET.

SANTO, bearing a small taper torch, led the way to a room at the rear of the house—a remarkably sumptuous room for a man supposed to be in the humbler walks of life; with costly curtains and tapestries, softest carpet—a rare luxury—of exquisite design, rugs and ottomans, a number of heavily-plated sconces and burnished brackets filled with waxen candles of various bright hues.

While Santo was busy lighting many of these candles, Cladius procured another purse and hastened to fulfill his engagement with the waiting Staffo—doing so with such brevity that the market-boy had not time to utter a word of the adoring speech he had set together for the occasion. After which, he and the fisherman sat down in the now brilliantly-illuminated and gorgeously-furnished apartment.

In the whole week that had passed since the cloud first fell upon his life, Cladius had never seemed so utterly downcast as now, and Santo contemplated him with painful solicitude.

"Alas, my son," he mourned, aloud, "I know full well how your proud spirit smarts in this unrighteous reverse. Nevertheless, bear up. It cannot last. I am sure that the same Providence which guided you to trouble will also see you safely through."

"I have not yet lost all faith, father Santo, but my courage is sorely tried. I do not even know the charge preferred against me in the Council. But for my faithful Doldrie, by whose advice I fled and secreted myself, I might now be languishing, unheard and cruelly condemned, in a dungeon—or worse, executed before a populace as ready to hoot as to praise, it seems."

Claudius rested his head in one hand and gazed vacantly downward, dreaming, awake, of the wide, billowy seas that had yielded so much for him, and to contrast, as never before, the sad turn in the wheel of fate that placed him here, a fugitive, skulking coward-like from his fellow-man. He said nothing of the recent attempt upon his life, knowing that Santo's anxiety in his behalf was already acute enough.

"Now is the time," thought Santo; "for I have not yet seen him more dejected. It will divert him so, that, as in a trance, he will at least find momentary relief from sorrow. Yes, I will divulge the secret. For the request of Rupert Riali and Venturi Adello was consummated when Cladius Alburno became the greatest captain in the navy of Venice. Now for the secret." And aloud: "My son, when you left me, many years ago, I told you to come back when you had honored the name my lips bestowed upon you, and then I would reveal a very important secret. Have you forgotten it?"

"Oh, no, father Santo. Your parting words are still green in my memory."

"Well, it relates, of course, to yourself. You must have suspicioned, ere this, that you were not my own flesh and blood—"

"But you were a father to me in all, and that sufficed," carelessly interrupted Cladius. "And since misfortune is at last my portion, it matters little who or what I am."

"That is the voice of despair and you must crush its foolish sway," reproved Santo, drawing his seat nearer. "You were ordered away almost as soon as you entered Venice, and that, and the vile ungratefulness shown you since, has been so absorbing as to exclude the subject from our digestion. Now that we are alone and in such sympathy, I wish to tell you who you are. Will you follow me?"

"Good father Santo, I am listening," answered Cladius, though indifferent.

"In the first place, you, and not Adio Adello—of whom you must have heard as the nephew of Marco Trienti, the senator—are the true son of Venturi Adello, once a prosperous merchant of Venice, who was nobly connected by marrying Lady Anice, the sister of Marco Trienti. You are, therefore, his heir."

Santo had not miscalculated the effect of such a speech. Cladius threw up his head in sudden amazement.

"Come, I think I have interested you quickly," chuckled the old man.

"By such an unheard-of avowal—yes. I love you too well, father Santo, to think that your mind wanders in crazy fancies. But to say—"

"My mind is clear as it was in the hour when you were first brought to me. Listen, while I recite after my own way.—Ah! did you hear that?"

"Only the peal of a gun. It is nothing. Go on," impatiently commented and urged Cladius, as the first thundering discharge of ordnance from the fortress of Porto di Lido came faintly to their ears.

"Twenty-three years past," continued Santo, slow and reflecting, "I was a hardy fisherman, living in a hamlet on the shore of the gulf of Manfredonia. I was quite popular among my fellow-toilers; noted for truth of nature and tongue—which I hope has never forsaken me. It was to this fact I owed an occurrence destined to change every plan of my life. One

night my good wife—rest her soul!—and I were in our cabin; she helpless abed and I dandling and crowing for an infant boy that very day born to us. We were three, and we were poor. My business had made but scant return, and I was sorely perplexed by the prospect of the wolf at our door. The wolf did not come—but a lady did; one whose pompous grace had been carefully concealed until she took off her wrappings in our exclusive presence. She thus addressed me:

"'You are Santo, the fisherman, widely reputed for truth and—poverty.'

"'With God's grace, you are right in both,' I replied.

"'Know, then, that I am here to propose something that will enrich you, though it calls for a great sacrifice. I have searched the hamlet through for some honest family who this day has had born to them a healthy male child—the father to be a man who knows how to hold his tongue. I can only find here what I want.'

"Two hearts in that rough cabin gave a thump of alarm at this. My wife and I looked at each other in dismay. We instantly suspected something of what was to come. The grand lady went on:

"'I will give you twenty brimming purses of the largest gold-pieces in the land, if you will part with your babe. I pledge that he shall be reared to wealth and refinement. But on one condition: the relinquishment must be forever, and you shall never try to see him again.'

"Imagine, if you can, how this proposal affected a fond father and mother just rejoicing over God's first gift in blessing of our union. My first impulse was to strike her down; next, I threw myself across the cot, upon my wife's bosom, and while we both wept, we clasped our darling tight, as if our visitor might dare to strive and wrest it from us by force. But, ah! poverty is a gall—we, who were older, knew that; and here lay a chance to prosper our babe. We thought of this, and not of the twenty purses. We talked the matter over amid our tears, and then I said:

"'Lady, we must know who you are and for what purpose the child is wanted. And we must have a written obligation from you to do for it what you say you will. Fear not, but speak plainly. If it is a great secret, the lips of Santo and his wife will be sealed as the Book of Heaven. Show a reasonable cause for such an unnatural request.'

"Seeing that she could not accomplish the purpose of her visit otherwise she confided fully in us. She was Lady Perci. Venturi Adello and Lady Anice were wedded. She had been delivered of a male child, which, however, appeared so sickly that the doctors had no hopes for its life. Adello had set his mind upon a male heir. Lady Anice so loved her husband that, rather than the possibility of stabbing his fondest ambition, she resolved to deceive him. Lady Perci was her counselor in this step, and took upon herself to carry out the plot of substitution which brought her, in person, to my cabin. I was to take the sickly and seemingly dying infant and give my own offspring in exchange for it and twenty purses of gold. Was it not a horrible suggestion? But when we understood all, and considering the future welfare of our own son—for we could rear him in naught but rags, labor, and to an aimless living—we consented. The exchange was made. I received the written guarantee from Lady Perci for all that she had promised, and have it still in my possession."

"If all this be true, father Santo—and I cannot doubt it, because I know that you are the very soul of truth—then, indeed, have you long and faithfully kept a wonderful secret," was the marveling exclamation of Cladius. But, after all, I would rather be the free and roving Cladius Alburno, than the heir of Venturi Adello—with my good ship and strong-armed crew and the broad sea lustering before me as it was one short year ago. For I like not the manners and customs of palaces; there is something that lurks in every speech or greeting of courtesy that seems to me, in its studied grace, like the vibration of some cloak of viperous treachery.

But, proceed," he finished, half-bitterly. "It is something to know that I am descended from such an honorable couple as Venturi and Lady Anice Adello."

"Oh, you anticipate me. I did not yet assert that you were the babe brought to me by Lady Perci in exchange for my own," bantered the old fisherman, pleased at having broken the other's cloudy mood.

"It were easy to guess it, after the first interesting assertion you made."

"Well, you are right. The infant thus thrown upon us did not die. The pure sea breeze and my wife's warm breast gave it new life and vigorous health. But let me show you, now, to what you are legally inherited, since you are the true and only son of Venturi Adello—for the Adio Adello of the Trienti palace is my own son, and ah! though he was educated for noble society, as Lady Perci had promised, how different is he from you, I am sorry to have to say. About five years after this event, who should come to my cabin but Venturi Adello himself. He said this to me:

"'Thou art Santo, the fisherman, celebrated in Manfredonia for integrity of character, and of whom my wife, Lady Anice, and Lady Perci Riali, seem to know a great deal, for they have spoken of you to me. Like the old philosopher, I have been searching for an honest man. Thou art he.'

"I trembled. Knowing the deep secret of his family, I feared that he had discovered all and was come to wreak vengeance upon me for the part I had taken in deceiving him. My reply to him was quite embarrassed therefore. His next words were:

"'Santo, I am about to intrust you with the treasure of a kingdom, all packed in gold and silver bars and precious stones.'

"My heart stood still. My wife, I remember, uttered a loud cry. Had we not known him, we would have fled as from a madman. Here is what he soon told me: Rupert Riali and his wife were abroad at the mines, and Riali would have a chest of immense treasure which he feared might not go safely to Venice if sent or carried the usual way. It would be shipped upon an unpretentious vessel. I was to receive it, far down on the coast, transport it to this cabin in the dead of night, bury it in my cellar and guard it until called for—my reward being a princely sum. I refused flatly to have anything to do with it. But I was persuaded in the end. Venturi Adello after this arrangement, set out to rejoin Rupert Riali. I received the chest at the appointed rendezvous, and when I saw its bulk, imagined the vastness of its contents, and had it buried deep down in the earth of my cellar, I began to think that my very reputation for honesty had gotten me into the worst of difficulties. I did not close my eyes for many nights, and when I did nap it was to dream nightmares of robbers, pirates and combat. I fervently prayed for the early arrival of that moment when Rupert Riali—who was coming by another ship—would relieve me of my trying responsibility. And here let me repeat the last parting words of Venturi Adello—"

"'We understand each other, Santo, and I have no fear that you will dishonor the trust we repose in you. The chest you are to guard contains the value of a kingdom. Let harm befall it only at the cost of your life. If Rupert Riali, and if I, never reach Venice, then all goes to my two children, who will share with Lady Perci. If my son, Adio, shall prove himself a true man, then give him the chest and its contents, first of all, for I know that he will generously divide. If he falls short, then all to my daughter to share as she desires. This is the will of Rupert Riali—do not forget it—who already distrusts the avarice of his wife.'

"Ah! my son, death was close at hand. Sadrac, the half-Moor pirate, attacked the ship Unita, on which they were homeward bound. Rupert Riali, Venturi Adello, Lady Anice—all these were killed. Lady Perci survived. The two children of Venturi Adello were named Adio and Adria. Adio inherited estate and went to the care of his uncle. But—hast! while I whisper a bold and mysterious act in your ear: Lady Perci brought the girl, Adria, to Venice and introduced it as her own child; a deception easily practiced, for the Adellos and the Rialis had been a number of years abroad, and home people knew nothing of their family matters, especially regarding children—"

Santo would have continued smoothly on with his narrative. But Cladius sprung from his cushion as if stung in brain and heart, while his cheeks and brow grew red and white alternately, and his large, handsome eyes dilated in an expression of sudden horror.

"Saints of Heaven!" he gasped, staggering forward and gripping the old man's shoulders. "Father Santo! Unsay that—quick! I command you! Do you know, do you realize what it portends? Mercy of God! Then Adria and I are children of the same parents! I—we have loved—oh! so passionately! We would have wedded! But there is some mistake!—nay, I beg you, tell me there is. Speak! Oh, father Santo!" and sinking back upon the cushion, Cladius groaned forth the anguish produced by this last ominous declaration in Santo's recital.

CHAPTER XXI.

SOMETHING OF ADRIA.

SANTO was not by any means proficient as a story-teller, and in this instance had made a statement that was rather premature in the fact, which descended harder than a cutlass-stroke upon the soul of the man he loved even as his own flesh and blood.

"Cladius! My son!" he hastened to say, alarmed at the consequences of his error in omitting an important item at its proper place in his revelations of the past. "Cladius! I beseech you to hear me. I have fallen into a most wretched blunder on account of my block-head forgetfulness. Look up and listen to me. Oh! I would that I had bitten the end from my tongue, sooner than say what I did until the proper time."

"What matters the time?" burst from Cladius, deliriously, starting from his seat and walking to and fro, smiting his hands together. "What matter if it is now or hereafter that you tell me I have been on the verge of mar-

riage with my own sister? Oh, Santo!—father Santo!—what have you done by telling me this cruel thing! And you, knowing it all along, have permitted me to go on in my idolatrous love for her, and hers for me; to embrace, to kiss, to woo, to dream of wedlock. Fount of pity! I feel as if I were going mad—mad!"

And for several seconds it did seem as if he was robbed of his right senses, so acutely overwhelming was the effect of the announcement that Adria—his pure, promised and adored Adria—was his sister, and thus was opened a chasm, wider than the vault of heaven, between themselves and the object of their young, passionate flame.

"Forsooth!" exclaimed Santo. "And if Adria is your sister, were it not better for me to tell you now—the first fair opportunity I have had since your entrance into Venice—than to permit a consummation so unhappy?"

"True, true; you are ever right, father Santo. But, oh! bear with me. Such a blow! My soul's core is iced, while my veins seem molten with a terrible fire. Think how near we were to being man and wife; and she my sister. Adria! Adria! Satan himself has planned this misery for us. Ah! poor Adria!"

"But, my son, you are a mile or so too fast. I did not exactly say that the glorious Adria was your sister, though appearances are that way."

"What?" Cladius wheeled short upon him.

"Though I said that Venturi Adello had two children on the Unita—Adio and Adria—and Adria was brought to Venice as Lady Perci's daughter; having shown you to be the son of Venturi Adello, and not Adio, who is my son; whilst, it does not follow that Adria was truly the child of Venturi Adello, any more than was Adio. You and Adria are cousins."

"Ah! in the name of wonders, father Santo," almost immediately calmed by the reassuring tone, "what sort of riddle are you? It seems to me that brain of yours must hold a startling store of secrets."

"As you shall see," returned the fisherman, with a smile of grim humor. "Now, sit you down while I explain, briefly, how Adria happens to be your cousin and not your sister, Stay a moment."

Rising, Santo went to a small receptacle in the wall behind the tapestry. Opening this with a peculiar key, he drew forth a small, ebon casket, scarce five inches long by three inches broad.

With the casket in one hand, he returned to Cladius, who was again seated.

"I did not mention another secret existing in the family of Venturi Adello," resumed the old man. "A little over one year after the date upon which I had received you, Cladius, a terrific storm passed over the coast, and I know that there were many wrecks. None happened in the immediate vicinity of our hamlet; but something else of consequence did. I, like many others, was on the beach at the first streak of dawn. Hardly had my feet touched the pebbled sands, when the waves washed ashore a piece of mast to which was lashed a man. This man had in his arms an infant but a few months old, and in his bosom he carried the casket which I now have in my lap. He was exhausted unto death—brave fellow!—having given his attention so arduously to the preservation of the child, which proved to be female. He survived barely long enough to tell his tale, give me the casket and the child—then I closed his eyes. He was one of the crew of a vessel called Giorga. In the storm of the night previous he had been washed overboard. Upon the frail support of a broken mast-piece he floated in the darkness, and presently discovered that he had a companion—a woman, with a babe in her arms, who was clinging frantically to all that lay between her and death. Of course that could not last. She presently bade him take the babe and gave him the casket from her bosom, charging him to guard both at any cost. Then before he could prevent, she, from sheer weakness, loosed her hold and sunk forever. That was all. We took the sea waif from the Giorga, and it lived."

"Strange, that the strong man should die and the puny thing survive its exposure to the elements," commented Cladius.

"Is not my whole truthful story strange, my son?—and this is part of it."

"True. Forgive my interruption, father Santo."

"Well, we had scarce gotten the babe back to crowing animation, when our cabin received another visitor. This time it was Lady Anice Adello; the date being about four years before my bargain with Venturi Adello to receive and guard the immense treasure of Rupert Riali. She was alone. And this was her object: in the absence of her husband she had given birth to a daughter. She had written to Venturi Adello, praising its cherub beauty, and so on, as a fond mother will. His replies to her showed that the crowning ambition of his life was to have a son and daughter, and now that he had these, he gave thanks to God. But her child, then advanced in months, was taken suddenly ill. The doctor predicted its early burial. Remembering Lady Perci's experience with me

on a former like occasion, she discharged the doctors, that her movements and the results might not be known, and had now come privately to me to ascertain if I could aid her in procuring a healthy female infant to substitute for her own; for she would deceive her husband a second time sooner than witness his grief when he should learn of the death of their child. It was a singular coincidence that we should be able to gratify her desires on the spot. Feeling no extraordinary interest in the waif of the Giorga, we readily offered it to her in her dilemma. Thus the infant we had saved from the sea became the second child of Lady Anice, and the rest of the world knew no better—not even Lady Perci. The true child of Lady Anice did die and was buried by us, with all believing it to be the waif of the Giorga, so secretly had the exchange been made. I did not, however, part with the casket. But not until years afterward did I conclude that it was my duty to ascertain who it was that I had given to Lady Anice, and who, as Adria, was known in Venice as the daughter of Lady Perci when the latter married Marco Trienti, twelve years ago. I had, meantime, learned that Marco Trienti was a passenger on the Giorga when that vessel encountered the tempest from which we rescued the waif. Let me show you, Cladius, what I discovered upon opening the casket."

With another key—very small, peculiar and filed by himself twelve years before—Santo opened the casket.

Inside the body of the casket was an air-tight lining which had preserved its contents safe from the waves that had buffeted it when the brave sailor of the Giorga brought it and the motherless babe to the keeping of Santo.

It contained two articles: a medallion and a piece of folded vellum. The first Santo opened and gave to Cladius. No sooner did his eyes rest upon the portrait it inclosed, than he exclaimed:

"Saints! It is the perfect image of my Adria!"

"Very true. A good likeness of the maiden who is supposed, by all Venice, to be the daughter of Lady Perci Trienti, while Lady Perci is misled in believing her to be the second child of Lady Anice—for she knew nothing of the other secret of Lady Anice, as I have said."

"Ah! Yes, it is my own, my sweet Adria!" murmured Cladius, rapturously kissing the miniature portrait of a face that so nearly resembled that of the woman he loved above all women on the earth.

"Nay, my son, it is not Adria, but Adria's mother whom you behold in that picture. A wondrously beautiful woman, indeed. But look, now, at this." And he unfolded the sheet of vellum.

"What do I see!" cried the young man, whose amazement was already exceeding all bound. "A priest's certificate for the marriage of Marco Trienti, of Venice, with Eloise Fontelle, of Paris! Great Jove! father Santo. And you say Marco Trienti was a passenger on the Giorga?"—he paused, too full for utterance.

The gray-haired fisherman smiled; his eyes twinkled.

"Well, what do you make of it?" he asked.

"That Marco Trienti had a former wife, and by her a child. Wife and child were washed from the Giorga in the tempest you spoke of; the child survived, was taken by Lady Anice as her own, and afterward appropriated by Lady Perci. I am the son of Venturi Adello, who married a sister of Marco Trienti; Adria and I are cousins. Marco Trienti, in his deep attachment for Adria, dreams not that she is the child who owes her being to himself and Eloise Fontelle. But why have you never made this known to him?"

"I saved it for you, Cladius. I intended that you should be the one to tell Marco Trienti both of yourself and Adria, and I would assist you, with indubitable proofs, to establish—"

What more Santo might have said was startlingly interrupted.

There was a noise of shuffling and stamping feet in the hallway, accompanied by mingled voices of anger and fear.

"This way, thou dog!—this way!" rung the angry voice. "I will teach thee to spy and prowl and pick at locks! Oh! Wait until I see your face before I drive my knife into such a villainous carcass! Come along!"

A second later the door was kicked open and strode Doldric, the Dane, bareheaded and with wet garments, dragging and jerking after him the vainly-struggling form of Staffo, the market-boy.

CHAPTER XXII.

CLADIUS RESOLVES TO ACT.

As the sound of disturbance in the hallway broke in upon the important conversation of the two men seated in the curtained and tapestried apartment, Santo snatched the medallion and parchment and, in a twinkling restored them to the casket and slipped the casket back to the secret drawer in the wall.

Cladius—whose instant and paramount thought was that he had been tracked and had now to encounter the emissaries of the Inquisitorial Ten—sprung toward one corner, and from

behind the curtains drew forth a magnificent sword, finely-tempered, bright as a mirror, jewel-hilted—the same presented to him on the day he so proudly entered Venice to swear allegiance to the government that now unjustly branded and relentlessly pursued him.

With this sword ready in a hand that could use it with deadly prowess, he stood on the defensive; and there gleamed a light in his eyes such as many had seen when he fought his path over the bulwarks of a pirate prey.

But when he saw the face of the corner, he dropped the weapon and hurried eagerly forward, arms outstretched in greeting.

"Look ye, Santo," snarled Doldric, bringing Staffo to his knees by a mighty twist; "I found this fellow half-way along your hall, skulking on tip-toe. Another of those accursed spies, no doubt, who do the dirty work of The Ten. Say the word; shall I sink my knife in his craven bowels?"

He raised the knife aloft as he spoke—the knife he had carried open-handed since the moment of receiving that stab from the spy who had followed him from the landing.

When Cladius paid Staffo the second purse, leaving him in such an abrupt manner, the honest-intending market-boy was rather nonplussed. He was determined, however, to offer his services to the great captain, Cladius Alburno, and for some time paced back and forth in the shadows of the nigh deserted street, meditating upon what course he had best pursue to accomplish his enthusiastic desire. Finally resolving to boldly enter the house of Santo, the fisherman—boldly, because, knowing that Cladius Alburno was outlawed and sought for by The Ten, it would be a dangerous experiment to intrude upon that person's lair of refuge, lest he be mistaken for a spy and summarily dealt with—he advanced to the door and gave a loud knock.

As Staffo knocked that first gun at Porto di Lido simultaneously boomed its ominous note; and the latter attracting the attention of the two in the tapestried room, they did not hear the summons from without.

Staffo gathered courage. With some pieces of bag-wire and small basket-hooks, which were conveniently in his pocket, he began fumbling and picking at the lock.

"I will see Captain Cladius Alburno, if I am cut to pieces for it. And if they will not let me in, I will force my way," he decided within him.

But neither the wires nor the hooks availed him, and not till he remembered that he carried the key to his own home did he meet with success. The key inside had accidentally been left, after turning, so that, by inserting a key upon the outside, this first key could be pushed inward out of the lock—which transpired in Staffo's favor, at least, at about the moment when Cladius and Santo were examining the medallion and the certificate of vellum proving a former marriage of Marco Trienti with Eloise Fontelle.

Groping ahead carefully—for the way was pitchy dark—he was suddenly alarmed by the entrance of some one behind him. In a second more there was a collision; a prompt hand, with a vise-of-a-gripe, laid hold on his collar, and he was roughly dragged to the light of the flaming sconces.

"Speak the word! shall I end his miserable spying life?" questioned the Dane, pausing for the command.

Santo threw up his hands imploringly.

"No—no!" he quickly replied. "Slay him not. Let there be no bloodshed."

"Hold, Doldric! Do not harm the boy," joined the voice of Cladius.

"What! My captain!—safe and here? Now, by St. Mark!" and Doldric threw his arms around the neck of his beloved commander.

"Ay, Doldric; 'safe and here,' faithful friend."

Had Staffo wished, he could have escaped easily at that moment when the pair were engrossed in mutual transport. But, rising, he stood silently by, intent with watching the man to serve whom was his ambition.

"May the foulest of fiends forever torment Azhort, the devil-faced deathsman!" invected the Dane, seeming loth to relinquish his delightful embrace. "I feared that you were done for when I saw you stabbed and worsted on the canal."

"Thanks to you, Doldric, and to father Santo—for you persuaded me this very morn to wear my under jacket of mail—the point of the blade did not reach me. But what of this boy?"

"Ha! yes—the boy. Fool!"—to Staffo, and again laying violent hands upon him. "You might have saved your neck by running off in this last minute. Now, knave! I shall deal with you."

"Captain Cladius!" appealed the youth, struggling. "Save me from this man who has an unfair advantage, for he is armed, and I am not!"

"So I will, honest Staffo. Stay, Doldric, my good friend; he has done much in faith for me." And Cladius explained; adding: "I am sure that he could not have meant wickedly, however suspicious the circumstance of your sus-

prising him. His father served upon the High-Watch. A ready sailor; true as steel. You may remember Staffo Montello. Come, Staffo, you must justify yourself. I—By the Saints! Doldric, you are wounded."

Cladius happening to glance at his palms saw that they were stained with blood. Even as the anxious exclamation left his lips Doldric released the market-boy, clapped his hands to his temples in a dazed way and staggered toward a large cushion, on which he threw himself.

"So I am," he murmured, scarce audibly. "I was struck by a cowardly assassin as I came neither. I am weak. My brain turns. Perhaps I am dying. If so, come nigh me quickly. I have something to tell you."

Santo had immediately found the wound. The stumble taken by Doldric had, indeed, preserved his life. The knife of the assassin, diverted from its aim, glanced upon the shoulder-blade, inflicting a bleeding, painful, though not dangerous gash.

Staffo threw himself on his knees before Cladius and cried, suppressedly:

"Mighty and honored Captain Cladius!—for such I know you to be—I implore you to give me service under you. For that I am here, for that I have already risked my life. My father, Staffo Montello, died among your crew, fighting bravely. I will fight, bleed, die for you, if you lead. I am young, but I am strong. And old mother—who has blessed the name of Cladius Alburno as that of a great and honorable chieftain—will bless you again, I know, if you accept me now."

Santo had run from the room for such articles as were necessary to stanch and close the ugly cut.

"Rise, Staffo," said Cladius, warmly grasping the hand of the market-boy. "I may yet give you a chance to prove your devotion to me. Wait."

Then he passed to the side of Doldric, who lay motionless and with closed eyes upon the soft cushions.

"Dear friend, by what oversight of Heaven do you come to me thus? Are you badly hurt? Speak to me, Doldric."

"O-h! this wound is smarting like a fire of bubbling iron," gnashed the Dane. "But, no matter. Your ear, Captain Cladius. At the time you fell or were thrown into the canal, I struck overboard the gondolier of the deathsmen. When the wolf-faced shape went to his infernal home I oared him thither. I entered. They talked in Spanish—he, his one-eyed wife and imp-of-a-son. I have come as soon as I could to tell you what I overheard—after ducking the young clown in the canal. There is a great plot afoot, at the head of which stands the Duke d'Ossuna."

Here Santo reentered and began to dress the wound, saying:

"Have no fears, Doldric—nor you, Cladius, my son. This is but flesh-deep and luckily on the left shoulder-blade. The right arm of our friend, the Dane, will almost immediately be strong enough to wield his sword. I say this knowingly. Drink this stimulating liquor, friend Doldric, and lie quietly—so—half upon your face. Come, we will soon make you comfortable. Easy—there."

"You were speaking of a plot, Doldric?" said Cladius, inquiringly.

"Ay, a plot to pillage Venice."

"Pillage? Venice?"

"To pillage and massacre. It is to commence at any moment. Azhort, the axman, is prominent in it. Further: his son—that devil's-shape-of-a-dwarf, Tobato—is planning to abduct Adria, your Adria, the pure and peerless Adria, and make her his bride. I think the whole thrice abominable family have been, are, or mean to become pirates."

"More, Doldric. Tell me more," Cladius urged, his eyes flashing and every muscle suddenly set vibrating by the shortly-panted words of the wounded man.

"Is not that enough?" groaned Doldric, under the operating touch of Santo. "Up and be moving, Captain Cladius. A carnage at hand and your betrothed imperiled. Strike, now, for this ungrateful Republic and for your Adria."

"Ay, by the saints! Up and away!" echoed Cladius, with glowing veins. "Bring forth my suit, father Santo. I go now as Cladius Alburno. I shall strike, and strike hard, for Venice and Adria."

"But, my son—the danger to you from such exposure?"

"To the winds with danger? Was I not bred to it? My suit. My sword and dagger, and the short and trusty truncheon that has felled many a pirate dog. Ha! ha! I feel that I am almost again myself, since hearing this news. Haste, father Santo." And as he rattled on thus, he was stripping off his flimsy fisherman's garb.

When Cladius was arrayed in his full, handsome costume, every atom of the warrior showed forth in shoulder and belt-strap, hanger, sword, truncheon, frock and buskins, a cap of richly waving red and white plumes, and his eyes burning with a light of sustaining pride as he grasped the truncheon in his mailed hand.

A touch fell upon his shoulder as he turned again to the side of his suffering friend—suffering silently while Santo deftly stitched together the gaping flesh of the left shoulder.

"Captain Cladius—my commander, as I already deem you," whispered Staffo, "let mine be the arm to gondolier you whithersoever you go. My poor market-boat will be safest for you."

"I came in the gondola of Azhort," strained Doldric, interruptingly. "It is the swiftest boat in all Venice. You will find it at the landing of the second street west of this, toward Isle Murano."

"Come, then," said Cladius, to Staffo, at the same time drawing about him a long sable mantle which Santo thoughtfully provided.

"Whither now, my son?" asked the old fisherman, apprehensively.

"To my own ship. To the High-Watch. With my feet on its deck—if I mistake not hearts that have served me through peace or peril—I shall once again know that I am a commander. And mark this, father Santo: I shall never again give up my power or my ship, though they brand me traitor and robber both; for as surely as the sun shines on the morrow I will have Adria aboard, and despite every gun on the Lido I shall bear her away. Then let Venice make new terms with me, when I am a rover at defiance with their hated Government. Come, Staffo."

Motioning Staffo to follow, Cladius strode from the house. Old Santo shook his gray head with misgiving for the result of this bold step.

"Captain Cladius," said the market-boy, as they hastened onward, "the High-Watch was to go out to-night, convoying a wealthy galleon. Four against five that we cannot catch her."

"Hasten, then, if it be so, we must pursue in a cutter. And, honest Staffo, if you do love me let your arms bend as never before. I am but a poor hand at the oar and I depend much upon you."

They were not long in finding the somber gondola. Staffo grasped the oar like one who has determined to accomplish the supreme object at any cost of mortal strength and skill.

The gondola shot away, cutting the water in a surge of foam under its sharp steel prow.

"On to Malamocco! On, Staffo—on!" cried Cladius, unrestedly.

"Ay, ay!" came the hearty response from Staffo.

And simultaneously rumbled on the night that second boom of the gun at Porto di Lido, whose deep tone said to every tool, spy, vassal and bravo of the scheming Duke d'Ossuna:

"Concentrate! Prepare!"

The High-Watch had not dropped out with the tide. Even as its crew were chorusing at the anchor-chain, a communication was received from the Council which stayed all further preparation for departure.

And as Cladius was being borne swiftly toward the vessel, upon a mission and hazardous purpose of his own, there was considerable commotion above and below the decks he had resolved to tread once more as commander, be the consequences of his venture what they might.

CHAPTER XXIII.

TOBATO HEARS THE NEWS.

TOBATO, the dwarf son of the headsman—hurled bodily, up and outward, by the powerful arms of Doldric, the Dane—went under the waters of the canal with a loud splash and arose to the surface with the buoyancy of a cork, spluttering, gasping, lashing about him infuriately, while his clownish mouth anathematized the fast-receding black gondola.

"Oh! Hi!" he worried and gulped in ravenous accents, gritting his teeth and pounding the water till it foamed. "Ugh! Pest! It was the man with hair of two colors. The spy who dived from our landing. I know that by his voice, which I heard as he lifted me over his head. Whata gripe of muscle! May the dragon of fate devour him, tooth and nail! Spy and robber! But where could he have popped from?—the Jack-in-a-box! He was not in the gondola, surely; for my keen-eyed father would have found and broken him limb from limb, bone after bone. Foul spy, robber and waylayer! And my pretty spangles! Come, now, they are ruined certainly. How am I to swim so far to the shore?—which shore?—for I am quite midway between Murano and the Lazaretto."

He glanced around, working arm and limb with the suppleness of a crab, and finally started toward the "deathsmen's fort."

Strangely enough for the hour the vicinity was deserted, and though the voices of the gondolieri were mellowing on every side, none seemed to approach that precise spot, much to the swimmer's vexation.

There was one boat, however—this unobserved by Tobato—which bore down swiftly upon him, six long blades in muffled locks propelling with quick, glistening sweeps. Its course was toward the abode of Azhort. In the bow stood one who, shading his eyes from the brilliant moonlight, gazed steadfastly in that direction.

But for this watcher in the bow, the boat would have fairly struck the head of the dwarf ere he caught the sound of dripping, bubbling

water that alone betrayed the long and rapid sweep of the oars.

"Look sharp, ahead there!" called the man, at the same time passing an order to those in his rear.

"Hi! Hiloo!" cried Tobato, rolling over barely soon enough to save his diminutive head from being crushed, and in the same movement dexterously laying hold above the clinker side—to roll again, as he received a rap from the forward sweeping oar that knocked him howling backward.

"Hi! Oh! You have broken my skull!" he screeched.

"Silence, you!" commanded the man in the bow, who had brought the boat to a stand and now assisted Tobato in, dumping him unceremoniously on the footboard. "Less noise, young scarecrow, or I'll toss you out of here."

"But my head! Hi! Let me scratch out the eyes of the rogue who smote me, for I know he did it purposely. What a lump!—i-yewp!—big as an egg already. I have a worse than toothache on top of my head."

"Hullo, here! As I vow, comrades, it is little bow-kneed Tobato, son of Azhort."

"Ay—yes—oh! And Azhort, my father, will punish the villain who raised this bump on my head, and break your bones for calling me 'bow-kneed'!" snapped the dwarf, who was vigorously rubbing and digging at the bruise in the depths of his thick, water-matted hair.

"Come, come, my jolly Tobato—"

"'Jolly Tobato'! But I am far from being jolly. I am mad—mad enough to munch and tear every one in pieces for this thump on my crown."

"Well, then, friend Tobato," laughed the man in the bow, who had again ordered the boat forward.

"I want no such friends, either, who try to run over me with a boat and then labor me with an oar. Wait till Azhort, my father, hears of it," was the surly-natured response.

"Come, you and I must have no quarrel, young spitfire."

"'Spitfire' in your teeth!"

"We are going to your father's house and will carry you there if you stop that screeching mouth of yours; if you do not—then over you go."

"And what do such fellows as you want at my father's house?"

"You are Tobato, son of Azhort, and do not know why we seek him to-night?"

"No—how should I? What is it?" queried the dwarf, in some surprise.

"If you are ignorant, then it is not for me to make you wise. Bide your time, and—silence."

Tobato continued to nurse his swollen head, scanning the features of the seven men as closely as he could by the light of the moon. Each countenance was very dusky, foreboding and set with black-browed, glittering orbs. Around each head, beneath each hat, was tied and lapped what appeared to be a somber scarf falling to the shoulders at the back, and above the fourteen knees reared the tops of monstrous, heavy boots.

To increase the wonderment of the dwarf—who was already scenting a mystery in the presence of these swarthy fellows—he observed several boats made fast to the landing of the "deathsmen's fort" when they arrived there, and none were permitted to touch the steps until a challenge and satisfactory signal had been exchanged.

The seven, with wide-mouthed Tobato pushed to the rear, entered the building.

"Hi!" he croaked, inwardly. "What in the world is up or loose? They carry a high band—assassins, every one, by the cast of their faces! I am as nobody in my own home. And here is a sentinel outside. I wish my father was here. I would teach them the cost of first battering my head, then pushing me out of their path. A pest upon them!"

As the great door was swung shut by the man who had evidently been stationed as a guard, the second gun from Porto di Lido boomed—the moment being simultaneous with that in which Cladius and the market-boy were speeding, in the black gondola, toward Malamocco; in the instant in which Azhort, then testing the diagram of Barban in the Trienti palace, struck down the serving-woman, Phla, in the private apartments of Adria and carried the latter to the narrow, secret and tomb-like passage of stairs, where we left her in Chapter XII.

Tobato's curiosity was amply satisfied a few seconds later.

Passing into the room of armorial trappings, which fairly blazed with light, he was amazed to see nearly a score of men attired like those who had dipped him out of the canal, and of similarly ugly aspect—these ranged about, all scowling, all muttering in a jar of suppressed voices.

Before them was Bal-Balla, walking to and fro, smiting her fists together, swinging her arms, her one eye aflame with excitement. She hailed the new-comers with scant ceremony; then, espousing her son, she strode forward, gripping him by the shoulder and snarling, in her tigress tone:

Azhort, the Axman.

"Hoo! Hoo! Tobato! We are in a mess here—a mess of bad luck!"

"What kind of mess is that? What are all these men wanting here?—and the boats outside?—and the guard on the landing? Strange doings, I think. And what is the trouble with you?" rattled Tobato.

"Your father told us of a coming riot and pillage of Venice—"

"So he did, my mother. I wish it was to commence now, for I want to hack and tear at the nobles, the senators, everybody living in palaces, and flaunting their over-fine airs."

"You were nearer having your wish than you dream of. It was fixed to transpire now—to-night."

"Hi! To-night! Say it again! Good!" exclaimed Tobato, his rat eyes sparkling.

"It was to be, I say. There is the trouble. Heard you not a gun as you and your father started for the Trienti palace?"

"True. I remember it."

"The gun meant that the garrison of Porto di Lido was overpowered and the fort in possession of the duke's party."

"Hi! This is news!" Tobato's eyes were widening.

"Heard you not another gun as you came in?"

"Oh, I think I did. Was it a signal too?"

"Ay. It meant that all in the plot with the duke should hasten to the appointed rendezvous, of which there are many. This is one. That explains why these men are here—though they came the earlier to bring me the news that has unstrung every nerve in my body. Hoo! the devil himself for bad luck!"

"Go on with the news. More news," squeaked the son, who could hardly stand still.

"There was to sound a third gun from the Lido—"

"Hi! More guns. Guns and pillage."

"Signaling the general outbreak. But it may be of no use. I am informed that the whole plot has been discovered by The Ten," panted Bal-Balla, who delivered her words sharp and fast.

A mumbling growl came from the listening and pirate-faced men around them.

"Military is moving and massing toward the ducal palace," she continued, with short, fierce breaths. "Squads are ready to charge the streets and patrol the canals. The Duke d'Ossuna is, by this, at Porto di Lido, awaiting the culmination of his plans. Scores of guard-boats are between here and the fort, driving out the gondoliers, and it is impossible to get a messenger down to warn the duke of his danger. If the third gun sounds and the riot breaks, there will be a massacre of the populace instead of plundering palaces. Oh! Hoo! Accursed miscarriage!" and again Bal-Balla paced backward and forward in a frenzy, while the men resumed the vent of their disappointment and ill-humor in undertones.

But Tobato leaped across the room as if thrown by a shock from a battery.

"Hi!" he cried, shrilly. "Then I must be moving. If the plot is out and the riot to start at any minute, my father will be in danger at the Trienti palace and wish himself away sooner than the hour he told me to come for him. Give me my bow. Hi! my good, strong bow. I am off."

He snatched down from the wall a well-filled quiver and a bow that was taller than himself. Fitting an arrow he drew it to the very head with strength and skill resulting from ample practice, and aimed at an armored effigy in one corner.

"So will I serve the nobles and senators, or anybody else who gets across my path!" he yelled, letting fly the shaft.

The feathered barb squarely shivered on the casque of the effigy, striking it off as if it were but the top of a ten-pin.

"Hoo, there! Look out with that bow!" ejaculated Bal-Balla, who had dodged out of the line of his aim.

"Hi! Hi! See how I can drive an arrow!" chirruped Tobato, glancing about him as if he would like very much to fit another and slay the man who had thumped him on the head with an oar.

Then he slung the quiver over his shoulder, balanced the bow at a trail, and with water still dripping from his spangled tights darted from the room, bent upon reaching the Trienti palace before the third gun boomed from the fort at Porto di Lido.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FATE OF OBEREK.

THE tableau encountered by Adio Adello—when Lady Perci pried open the door of the red room with her nose, after having turned the knob with the bones of her cheek, nose and brow, and found herself face to face with him in the same instant that Oberek, foaming at the mouth and clawing the air, sprung from the aperture behind the open mirror—was quite startlin', and he broke short in his speech, as shown, staring first at Lady Perci, and then at the miserable maniac whose mysterious presence and frightful appearance doubly confounded him.

With the leopard-like leap and dog-bark cry that told of the advent of Oberek, Lady Perci gave one rapid glance over her shoulder. Her guilty heart seemed to rise in her throat and a pallor like death whitened her features.

"Ah! I am lost!" she moaned in her trembling soul. "Lost, indeed. That fiend deathsman has let loose this mad fellow—mad Venturi Adello—purposely to slay me. Leaving me helpless, he intended to compass my death thus as a penalty for depriving his ghoul-wife of one of her eyes. What would I not give to be rid of these bonds and the gag. I shall be murdered. For Adio, besides being hardly a match for this reckless lunatic, is evidently under a spell; he does not move hand or foot, when another lost minute will be fatal to me. Oh! for the use of my hands. But I am lost. I may as well nerve myself for the doom that is to come. The monster will no doubt rend me in pieces."

All this in a second of time, for almost instantly Oberek began to approach the two, stooping and stealthy, like some wild and uncaged animal gathering to pounce upon its prey.

His eyeballs, in their sunken sockets, rolled and glared; his lips worked and frothed audibly; the thin, long-fingered hands, with nails like eagle-claws, darted out and in before him, as if in impatient anticipation of a gripe upon the object of his furious hatred.

"Oh! Oh!" he whined, in curdling accents. "You are before me, Lady Perci; I am free! Thou torturer Cat! Devil-woman! For twelve years I

have nursed my blood of life, looking to this moment. You chained me in a prison-cell—yes, for twelve years. You flogged and half-starved me. You turned me from a man into a beast. I am a beast now—ay, a hungry, ravenous, merciless beast as you shall find. Oh! Oh! Lady Perci. I am free—do you see? I will drag each hair from your head! scratch out your eyes!—flay you with these nails long and sharp! Be ready. I am coming. Ha! h-a!" and he laughed hideously, till every vein ran cold in Lady Perci's frame.

But the harsh voice of Oberek in its direful threats roused Adio from his momentary stupefaction. Drawing his sword, he threw himself before Lady Perci and cried, sternly:

"Back, there, thou dog! Who are you? Where do you come from? Lunatic! Out of this!"

"Aside there!" yelped Oberek. "If you stand between me and my vengeance you shall fall, too! Oh! Oh! Nothing can block my path. Beware!"

"Back—fool!" commanded Adio, grasping his sword-hilt determinedly.

Oberek uttered a shout of mingled anger and derision and bounded forward—then another cry as Adio's weapon sunk into his shoulder, forcing him painfully backward.

"Well done for Adio!" exclaimed Lady Perci, behind her gag, plucking up courage at seeing Oberek repelled.

"Madman!" warned Adio, in excitement; "if you come at me again you die! Keep off!"

"Oh! Oh! I will kill you for that thrust!" screamed the wretched and senseless being, tearing at the bleeding wound.

Again he sprung upon Adio.

"Now may Adio smite him dead in his tracks!" fervently prayed Lady Perci, standing, a helpless witness of all, in the doorway.

Adio dropped quickly to one knee and against his forward knee he firmly pressed the hilt of the sword, with the point raised.

The movement was so sudden and the velocity of Oberek's attack was so great, that ere the latter could check himself the keen blade penetrated between his ribs, passing upward and out at his back.

An unearthly shriek burst from the impaled wretch. Throwing up his arms he reeled over and fell prone upon the carpet.

Adio lost not a minute in freeing Lady Perci from her bonds and the gag. Immediately she ran past him toward the mirror.

She has seen the wolf visage of Azhort in the aperture.

He was visible only a brief moment, waving the flambeau over his shaggy head and darting a glance of surprise into the room—for the scene he beheld was vastly different from that he expected—then clutched and swung shut the massive iron-backed mirror before Adio perceived him.

Lady Perci laid a fierce hold upon the mirror frame, jerking at it and pressing vainly upon the knob of its secret spring.

"Curse him!" she panted, in exertion and discomfiture. "He has broken the spring on the other side. Oh! if I could but get at him with my own arms and the stiletto I carry in my bosom, and aided by Adio's sword, I would teach the Satan's-vassal how I can strike back at one who has sought my life. My malediction on him—and on this mirror, because I cannot open it!" and with the last, Lady Perci, vexed to a rage, gave the mirror a spiteful kick that s'ived it from top to bottom, the pieces jingling around her.

"Body of Bacchus!" exclaimed Adio, who was wiping his blood-reeking sword. "Why did you do that? I have heard of most abominable luck falling upon the homes of those who break a mirror."

"To the pit with such superstitious folly! Azhort, the deathsman, is in that wall, which contains, as I may as well tell you, a secret passage. There is no longer any doubt that he is in the palace."

"If he is here, we must see to it, for important reasons, that he does not escape. Information has reached the Council that this same Azhort, for so long chief executioner of Venice, is no less a person than Sadrac, the half-Moor pirate, years ago the dread of both the Mediterranean and Adriatic."

"Ah! good Adio, I have this very night discovered the same fact."

"But I beg of you, dear Lady Perci, tarry not here. There is no time to speak of Azhort, or of secret passages, or of this vile dead man on the floor, whose presence I expect you to explain in future. I came to inform you of a great danger which threatens you and all within the palace. Come with me at once. I will tell you as we go."

"What is it, dear Adio?" she asked, curiously, following him from the red room and along the hallway. "Ah! I notice, now, that you are equipped as if for combat. What new escapade of yours? Do not endanger yourself, my precious Adio."

"In a few words, Lady Perci: The Ten have discovered a plot to pillage Venice and assassinate the nobles and senators. The Duke d'Ossuna is its prime head and instigator. This news was received only a few minutes since, and a re-enforcement of guards are already concealed at the rear of the palace. Marco Trienti, like myself, has quietly armed. It is a general uprising! nearly every servant in every palace is in the plot with the duke. There will be warm times directly. But I think the cut-throat dogs will receive a wholesome lesson both from the Government and those they purpose massacring. Much prudence must be exercised, though. Haste."

"Why, Adio, you alarm me. When is this to transpire?"

"Look for it at any hour. You must find Adria. Secrete yourselves. Ah! dear Lady Perci, I would not have harm befall my worshiped Adria—life would lose all charm for me. There is her room. Let me urge you to hasten to her."

Lady Perci entered the private apartments of Adria—and paused in the center of the room, amazed at seeing Phla, the India-woman, who still lay upon the floor unconscious from the severe blow dealt her by the fist of Azhort.

Adio turned off toward the grand staircase, sheathing his sword as he went.

And as Adio thus walked away, intending to seek Marco Trienti—and while Lady Perci stood riveted in astonishment above the lifeless form of Phla—there came over the waters a dull but distinct boom from a distant *bombarde*—the third and last signal-

ing salvo from the fortress at Porto di Lido—seeming louder than the two previous explosions and variably thrilling thousands of bosoms in threatened and conspiracy-infested Venice.

Azhort was right in his conjecture. The impatience of the scheming duke would not permit of waiting until midnight. Exultant over his first success in so easily subjugating the garrison of the fortress by internal treachery, and now boastfully sanguine for the rest of his carefully-devised plans, he had given the order for the third gun to be fired. As its fiery mouth belched out on the night, he stood upon the high rampart of the captured fortress—alone, for Dom Pedro de Toledo and the Marquis de Bedmar were busy at other important points—to gaze upon a scene of violence he and two others had atrociously contrived: of blazing buildings, warring men and the shout that would say:

"Strike for the Duke! Death to the misrulers of Venice!"

Many who knew—as did Bal-Balla and the piratical throng in the Deathsman's Fort—that the plot was discovered and strong measures were afoot to crush it, vented loud growls of dissatisfaction and apprehension when the third gun sounded. But it was too late to withdraw from the maelstrom of fire and death their own fanatical zeal had invented.

The riot had commenced.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE COMBAT IN THE PALACE.

NOTWITHSTANDING the betrayal, by Antoine Jaffier, of that stupendous plot for the overthrow of the Government of Venice, its pillage and massacre of a great part of the inhabitants of the splendid capital—and although many important seizures had been made by the Council, besides taking prompt and vigorous measures to meet and suppress the prospective riot—a conspiracy of such dimensions as the one fomented jointly by the Governor of Milan, the Viceroy of Naples and the ambassador de Bedmar, was not to be crushed without some struggle and bloodshed; this particularly under the unfortunate complication of low magazines, a fleet unorganized for such an emergency, giddy and fanatical factions, existing everywhere, a wrangling senate, and, last of all, soldiers half ready for mutiny because of tardiness in their pay.

But the secret and powerful energy of The Ten was at work.

Almost with the sound of the first gun from Porto di Lido, agents were busy: the chiefs of wards and streets were fully apprised of the danger. Soon a cordon of boats, containing armed men, stretched out across the great lagoon, with prows to the south, silently, but sternly compelling back toward Malamocco every species of craft then making in the direction of the capital—this accounting for the fact that the water in the vicinity of that spot where Tobato received his ducking was so unusually deserted.

In black dots, at intervals, the guard-boats paused and remained, waiting for re-enforcement that was to come shortly. This quick measure also cut off communication between the principality and the fortress, where the duke, unwarmed of the snare into which he was treading, was gloating over his first successful move in overpowering the garrison. The fact was speedily ascertained by a few of the cohorts of the conspirators, though too late to give the alarm.

Additional patrols suddenly appeared upon the narrow, lane-like streets; but neither unguarded voice or clank of weapon betrayed the strong concentration of loyal forces, or betokened aught beyond the usual serenity of contented surrounding.

At the second gun the conspiring faction moved stealthily toward appointed rendezvous, to arm and prepare. Stealthier still progressed the action of the lynx-eyed Ten, watching, through its numerous spies, and with the slyness of a cat and the formidable jaws of a lion nerving for both conflict and punishments.

The fates of the leading conspirators were even decided upon in the somber closet of the terrible Ten.

Then the third and last resonant boom from the captured fortress.

Simultaneously a murmur like the sound of a distant and approaching hurricane was audible on every hand. Here and there vari-colored jets of fire were seen on land and water. The murmur deepened until it became a sullen roar. As if by magic the quiet scene was transformed to a panoramic pandemonium. Up from street and wave rose the hoarse, echoing shout:

"Strike for the duke! Death to the misrulers of Venice!"

Along the Lido and from the many islands, hissing rockets filled the air, floating their sparks in starry showers; Roman candles, lightning darts and huge bonfires burst forth on the moonlit night. All the bells of Venice clanged in discord till their iron throats seemed about to crack in twain.

Louder grew the uproar, mingling, now, with the rattle of musketry and the savage cheers of reckless minions charging, pell-mell, upon the ducal palace and at St. Mark, and the dull, quivering explosion of petards at the arsenal gates.

All in a twinkling, as it were—the whirl of battle, resistance, death, illumination, and soon the whole augmented by the devastating torch plied till flaming buildings reared their red-smoky columns to the sky.

As Adio Adello placed his foot upon the grand staircase in the Trienti palace, the note of the last signaling gun came to his ears, announcing the commencement of the first act in the night's tragedy.

From the many rooms and halls poured the half-score armed and hungry-jowled bravos—dare-devils all—led by the treacherous page Fauco.

"Strike! Strike for the duke! Death to the misrulers of Venice!" cried the page, brandishing lance and dagger, as he and others swarmed into the main hall.

"Down with Marco Trienti!" bellowed the murderous horde.

"Confusion to the foes of Venice!" shouted Adio, as, sword in hand, he rushed down the staircase.

However foppish the nature of Adio, he was no coward. Right bravely he entered upon the strife, aiming and firing a pistol as he descended, then hurling the empty weapon among the crowd that advanced to meet him.

Marco Trienti appeared, coming from the room in which we have seen him with Adria. He was formidable armed—a heavy sword in hand, a buckler before him, and on his head a cap with the ancient war-plumes of the Trienti.

Giacco, the guard at the entrance, produced and blew a shrill blast upon a whistle, in answer to which four lancers entered from the portico, "dressing" at his back. Another blast and four men ran in from the shadows of the garden, blocking across the rear of the hall.

Meantime Fauco had promptly attacked the senator, dagger and spear, supported by three of his followers. Others confronted Adio ere he reached the foot of the staircase. A clash of weapons in the din of combat now rung through the palace.

"Charge, there! Charge front and rear!" thundered the soldierly voice of the veteran guardsman.

Eight sharp lances, headed by the short bayonet-sword of Giaco, lowered and charged furiously upon the surprised assassins, who were thus suddenly called upon to defend their own lives in the very beginning of their premeditated outbreak and wholesale slaughter.

"Strike for the duke! Death to the misrulers of Venice!" vociferated Fauco, desperately, when he perceived the trap which encompassed them.

"Thou treacherous dog!" exclaimed Marco Trienti, dealing a blow that shattered the spear and broke the wrist of the page. "Double-faced knave! Had I before known what I learned a half-hour since—that you were once the strangling-chamber assistant of the vile chief headsman of Venice—you would never have found opportunity for this attempt on my life. Take that, traitor hound! I shall mark you, if I do not slay you!"

Fauco shrieked with pain as the sword of the enraged senator broke his wrist—then shrieked again and sunk to the marble flags, as the blade of Giaco, the guardsman, fell and smote with crushing force upon his shoulder.

"That for you, leader of rogues!" he growled, with the stroke.

Adio was tight pressed and fighting courageously in the midst of a network of spears, daggers and battle-axes—the latter pilfered from the armory-room of the palace—and his face, body and hands bled and smarted with a number of wounds that could not be avoided in the flashing rain of steel.

Bold, hazardous, rioting spirits like those who had conceived an easy massacre of the palace household, were not overcome at a single blow. The charge of the lance-men, front and rear, and the swords of Marco Trienti and Adio, were met with wild yells and a stubborn resistance of arms.

"Strike for the duke!" they cheered among themselves.

"Down with the traitors and assassins!" called Marco Trienti, above the din.

As the wedged and battling mass of humans surged back and forth along the spacious, blood-stained hall, a new and startled cry burst from Adio.

Out of the roar of marble panels and fluted columns came a swiftly gliding, demon form—the form of Azhort, capless, and with long raven hair flowing loosely tangled half across his wolfish visage. Over his shoulder was swung a limp, insensible figure, and in one sinewy hand he grasped the long-bladed knife, in the artful and deadly use of which he boasted of no equal in Venice.

Adio saw him, saw and recognized the helpless, lifeless burden he carried.

"Tis himself!—the fiend!" gasped the young man, thrilled with dread. "He has Adria—my Adria—in his villainous arms! Body of Bacchus! The Pirate! Aside, ruffian! A path here! Halt, headsman!—man with a wolf's head! Drop that body! Halt, I say!"

Maddened by the thought of some horrible peril menacing the maiden of his heart's adoration, he laid about him, sweeping, lunging, wielding his weapon with both hands, dividing his glances between his adversaries and the hateful, receding shape of Azhort and his valuable captive.

Just then came a cry from Marco Trienti.

"Adio! Help! I am wounded unto death!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

ABDUCTION OF ADRIA.

AZHORT lost no time—after closing the mirror in the red room and prodding asunder, with this knife, the delicate spring giving access to the secret passage—in returning to Adria, whom he had left to the terrors of strangely-hushed darkness and imaginations of limitless evil in store.

"I do not think that Lady Perci, or any one else, will be able soon again to make use of this passage to the prison chamber," he chuckled, gutturally, after having destroyed the frail spring, and kneeling before the movable stone block. "Power of earth! Let me get out of the palace, now, quickly as possible. I look upon the time spent here as so much waste—excepting, I have learned of one yet alive who can tell me where the treasure-chest of Rupert Riali is hidden. I am nearer to it, than Lady Perci is. Ha! ha! ha! Be sure that I shall hunt hot after Santo, the fisherman. Plague! What if the cute knave has spent every bauble and coin piece? I must not suppose such an impossible and disagreeable thing. So—now then for the pretty maid whom I have promised Tobato for his princess, when we shall quit Venice and rove the free sea with a Barbary crew."

Being more familiar with his way, Azhort made rapid progress in retracing through the secret passages, discovered to him by the diagram of Barban, the chain-forger.

He relieved Adria from the binding strips of skirt, saying:

"Now, hark ye, pretty one: I have no mood of patience for those who give me trouble. Go, you, ahead of me and do as I bid. A single cry, a pause to resist, and I will stick this knife in your bosom. Beware, then, of trifling. Come, proceed—down," and waving the flambeau and unsheathing the bright knife in earnest of his threat, he motioned her forward.

Adria obeyed in the apathy of despair, shivering in her very soul at the scowling visage and menacing manner of her captor.

"Why should I pray to him?—why cry out or re-

sist?" sighed the hapless maiden. "I know not where I am—but in his power, and I must act this to its dreadful end. Sustain me, oh, Heaven!"

Carefully following every low-uttered intimation given her, she was at last commanded to halt—this directly behind the column opening into the room of marble panels.

Azhort cautiously peeped, first, through the eyelets of the picture of Rupert Riali. He saw Marco Trienti, in war-cap and buckler, leaning, in an attitude of listening, upon his ponderous and polished sword.

"Ha!" was his surprised thought. "Dash and thunder! What can that mean? The senator is armed evidently for combat. He seems to be waiting for somebody or something. Perhaps the plot is discovered?—or Fauco, the dog-of-a-page, may have been overheard while telling me the detail of the duke's plans. What!—ho!—there goes the gun!"

The third and final discharge of a gun from the fortress of Porto di Lido boomed while Azhort was thus spying in astonishment upon the battle-arrayed senator. The ominous signal penetrated throughout the palace and into the eyelets of the picture, tingling its dull rumble in the ears and brain of the headsman.

Hurriedly extinguishing the flambeau, and thrusting open the artificial column, he grasped up and swung the maiden upon his shoulders and hastened out across the flags of the room.

Sounds of strife were already ringing in the outer hall. He heard the voice of Fauco, shouting:

"Strike! Strike for the duke! Death to the misrulers of Venice!"

And the answering and defiant voice of Adio Adello:

"Confusion to the foes of Venice!"

Then the pistol-shot; the crash of spearhaft and steel, dagger and truncheon; the loud whistle and sonorous command of Giaco; the charge of the lancers front and rear—and into the bedlam of struggle and din Azhort plunged with his burden, holding his huge knife ready for stroke or parry, as he forced skillfully past the riotous combatants.

Adria was overcome by the sudden and horrid vision of conflict and by the fact of finding herself borne within its bloody vortex. Closing her eyes, and with every nerve relaxed in fear, she lay voiceless and limp in the brawny embrace of the man-fie.

"Halt, there, headsman!—man with a wolf's head!" burst from Adio Adello. "Drop that body! Halt, I say!" and breaking through the hemming circle of his enemies, he dashed forward in pursuit of the fleeing, exulting dwarf.

A short glance over his shoulder and a mocking, demon laugh was the reply of Azhort. Then another glance, and he paused, turning to meet the young man's impetuous attack.

"Drop what you carry, there—vulture! Surrender, Sadrac, the pirate? Here's at you for a beast and man-slayer!"

His sword rose and circled for a downward cut that must have assuredly crushed through the interposing arm and skull of the headsman had it fallen.

A frightful look came into the face of Azhort, as he heard pronounced that name he had thought so cleverly buried for years past. His black, shuddering eyes glared like balls of fire; his pearly and sharp teeth glistened and ground together unlimped, and his hyena visage wrinkled in seams of passion.

"Thunder of air!" he hissed. "Thou dog of nobility! Never again will you speak the name of Sadrac, the pirate!"

The long, broad-bladed knife flashed upward, balanced for a second in fingers of steel, then hurtled through the air like a lightning-flash, burying itself to the very hilt in Adio's throat.

In the same instant, and as Adio fell, something whizzed close to the ear of Azhort, passing over the heads of the warring, jamming mass in the hall. This was followed by a piercing scream from the top of the grand staircase, and Lady Perci—who had been attracted by an irresistible desire to witness the exciting scene—sunk down with an arrow-shaft protruding squarely from one of her eyes.

"Hi! Hi!" shrilly piped Tobato, from the main door to the portico, and fitting another arrow to his stout bowstring. "Hi! Hi! you put out the eye of my mother, Lady Perci, and in return I give you that for both eye and brain! And I have smarted the side of Marco Trienti! Death to senators and nobles! I hate them! Hi! this way, my father. The gondola is ready—not ours, but a boat to answer. One more, now!" and again the deadly bow of the young imp twanged, sending a barb into the back of a lanceman.

It was an arrow from Tobato's bow, sped true and fierce, that wrung from Marco Trienti the gasping cry:

"Adio! Help! I am wounded unto death!"

Azhort swiftly passed his son, calling to him:

"Tarry not for this scene. To the boat. Haste. See—I have your prize!"

"The prize! Oh, the prize! It is Adria—lovely-faced Adria! Delicious luck of Heaven! I knew that my very smart father would not fail to secure her. Hi! Joy! Do not hurt her. Gently. Be very glove-fingered in handling my rose-lipped Adria," crowed Tobato.

"Quick! In with you, here. Keep guard of her while I push off."

Placing Adria within the rude boat, Azhort took the oars and shoved away from the landing. Tobato capered like a monkey before the dumb and hopeless captive.

"Oh! Hi! My angel, Adria! Look at me. I am Tobato, son of him who was once chief executioner of Venice. I am a gay and loving lark. I adore you, diamond-eyed Adria. I am going to be your husband, soft-cheeked Adria. Open your sweet mouth and let me hear the harp of your voice, jewel of all Adrias. Oh! my warm heart is brimming for you, my queen Adria. What an ardent lover I shall be. Such happiness for both of us. Smile on me—"

"Pooh, there!" grunted Azhort. "Save such candy-stuffing till you have your bird alone and more safely caged."

"Merciful Heaven, deliver me from this cruel fate, even if I must die!" moaned Adria, in an agony of spirit, and with the faint words she swooned outright, falling into the eager arms of grinning, exuberant Tobato.

"Hi! Oh! Look, father, where she lies! Weight

of a feather! Burden of bliss! I could hold her thus for a century! I will have a kiss—"

"Foolish boy! Quake of earth! Do you not see that she has fainted? Wet her face. Ha! Perdition is unbound, indeed, in this plot of the Duke d'Ossuna!"

The last as he noted the tumultuous surrounding that told of contention and death on water and shore, lighted by the soaring moon, the blaze of signaling fireworks and flaming buildings, and resonant with the clatter of pealing bells.

There was no obstruction in the course from Isle Murano to the "deathsmen's fort," on the rampart roof of which a red beacon on a tall pole shone and gleamed like a great evil eye.

Some distance down the lagoon rose the mutter of another assault-at-arms. The soldiers in the guard-boats were being forced to retreat, though not by the faction of conspirators. Sullen and spiritless they answered back to a war-cry that carried with it a thrilling tremor:

"Alburno and victory! Strike home for Alburno! Viva! Viva!"

But this well-known and resounding echo from stern throats—the battle-cry of the crew of the famous High-Watch—did not reach the three in the boat that was speeding from Isle Murano, bearing Adria away.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CLADIUS LEADS HIS CREW.

In the clatter and commotion on the vessel immediately ensuing upon receipt of startling information and peremptory orders from the vigilant Council—and shortly after the roar of the second gun from Porto di Lido—and while six barges were manning, ten to the barge, six at the oars, at the ship's side—the black and well-known gondola of Azhort came gliding among the boats' crews like a swift, somber specter.

There was no challenge, in passing the guard-boats on the lagune, or any craft going down, the object being to keep as many as possible from the immediate vicinity of the capital; hence, Cladius, his identity safe in the deceiving cover of the well-known gondola of the headsman, in due time found himself among those in whose friendship he had unbounded faith.

"Hoy, there! High-Watch!" signaled the energetic voice of the market-boy, twirling the gondola round with a skillful sweep.

An unpleasant mutter answered from the sailors.

"There is the steel-prowed shell of Azhort!"

"Oh! the bloody axman!"

"Ay, so it is. All Venice must know, by this, that Azhort, headsman, is the devilish pirate, Sadrac, supposed to have perished some seventeen or eighteen years ago!"

"Let us capture him at once!"

"Nay, wait for orders."

All of which was distinctly heard by the two in the gondola.

"Why, you are mistaken," hailed Staffo. "I have not Azhort in here, but one whom, I am sure, you will welcome. Wait, crew of the High-Watch."

Here Cladius stepped out upon the narrow deck of the gondola, casting aside his cloak and baring head and face.

"Friends, you know me well," he cried. "I am the outlawed Cladius Alburno; proclaimed a traitor by judges who gave me no opportunity to vindicate my honor, and who set assassins on my track in the dark."

"Alburno! Alburno! Viva!" swelled from three-score throats.

A long line of faces were peering over the bulk-wark of the High-Watch down upon the scene, and the cry from below was taken up by those above till the air tremored with vivas.

It was with a thrill of joy, that he found himself embraced by the whole of his own tried and trusty crew.

It was not long before Cladius found himself at the head of the six battle-barges—in each six at the oars and four in the bow with unsheathed weapons—forging upward and against the outrunning tide which had aided materially in the quick trip of the black gondola.

They had nearly reached the long line of guard-boats, and had been challenged and ordered back when the third gun belched from the fortress.

In the instant roar of riot, clamor of bells, volleying noise of firearms and brilliant illumination, the cordon of guard beheld an array of armed and fierce men approaching steadily—prominent in the foremost barge a noble form, sword and truncheon in hand, the long plumes of his cap bobbing on the breeze.

"Back, there—all! Retire to Malamocco! Come no further, on your lives!"

"Way! Way for Cladius Alburno!" answered the crews of the barges, in stern chorus.

"Back, knaves, to Malamocco!" roughly cried the chief of guards, preparing for a struggle.

"Through everything to the Trienti palace!" said Cladius, to the officer at his side, and the order passed promptly among the seamen.

A cheer of approval burst from his men.

"Alburno and victory! Viva!"

"Tis Cladius Alburno, the traitor; I know it by his own voice, and the war-cry of his soldier-sailors!" growled the guardsman to his comrades. "No doubt he is in this plot with the duke, the marquis and the ambassador. Resist him."

"Alburno and victory! Strike home for Alburno! Viva! Viva!" yelled the sailors.

Steadily, swift and irresistible, advanced the battle-barges. A desperate collision ensued, and swords and cutlasses gleamed and smote in the glare of fire and moonbeams. First to fall was the bold but foolish chief of guards.

The onset of Cladius was brief. A break was forced and through this swept the six battle-barges from which rose again the shout:

"Alburno and victory! Viva! Viva!"

"On, my men; on to the Trienti palace!" now urged Cladius, when they were disengaged from the circle of conflict, and fixing his gaze upon the distant outlines of the palace, its front shining crimson-white in the wavering flashes of adjacent conflagration.

When Cladius Alburno arrived at the palace the combat in the hallway was over. Part of its results met his gaze as he entered, followed by half a dozen sailors: stained and dirty flagstones and along the

base of the wall lying three bravos bound hand and foot, their bleared eyes snapping in glances of rage and fear for their doom. They were all who survived of those who had meditated the slaughter of the palace household. The rest—and among them two lance-men—had been carried to the rear.

Giacco, the guardsman, with the point end of a broken spear and beard spattered in blood, came forward to meet the party, who were readily admitted by the sentries.

"Ouf!" he exclaimed, in surprise. "It is Captain Cladius Alburno."

"Even I, good Giaco. And I hope you do not, as the rest, believe me an outlaw because the Council stamps me as such."

"Shiver my buskins! You do not look like one who could play traitor."

"Nor am I. But, what has happened here?"

"The devil on earth! A plot to kill all in the palace—and I think it has not fallen far short, after all. There is what remains of the assassins"—pointing to the two securely-bound ruffians—"and I have lost two good lance-men. For the balance—well, see for yourself"—the last gravely and nodding toward the room of marble panels and fluted columns.

Cladius stepped within the apartment. The sight he saw was a shock.

On three rudely-improvised couches were three bleeding forms. The first, Lady Perci—dead. The bruise on her brow from the wine-bottle hurled by Azhort was gaping and discolored, and a sightless, ghastly eye-socket showed where the arrow of Tobato had pierced her brain. On the second couch lay Adio Adello—dead—a white, red-wet kerchief bound about his throat to hide the deep wound inflicted by the headsman's knife. On the third couch, groaning at intervals and breathing with painful difficulty, a long arrow shaft protruding from his side, lay Marco Trienti. The latter, evidently, had not long to live.

Phla, the India-woman, though scarce fully recovered from the stunning stroke of Azhort, was present and doing all in her power to relieve the agony of the senator.

"Saints of Heaven! Oh, my friend! What horrid scene of destruction have I come upon!" cried the young man, hastening across to bend over Marco Trienti.

The fast glazing eyes opened.

"Ah! Cladius, is it you? I am dying. I thought we were better prepared for the scoundrels; but you see this wound?—the arrow cannot be withdrawn."

"Do not despair," whispered Cladius, with emotion,

"Nay, there is little use of hope. I know that I cannot live till day-dawn. But there: praise to Heaven! I am glad that you have come. Let me say, before I die, that I never believed you false to Venice, and I would have saved you from disgrace had it been in my power."

"Thanks for those words, dear friend."

"And Adria—so young, so pure, so beautiful. Watch over her when I am gone. To you I leave her. Death has deprived her of all in this hour. I know how deeply you are bound in each other."

"Tell me, quickly; where is Adria?"

"Well you may ask for her," spoke up Phla. "She is in the clutches of Satan. Azhort, the headsman, has carried her off. Ah, me! My poor babe!"

"Cladius!" said Marco Trienti, feebly. "I have felt strangely toward Adria of later years. I once married before meeting Lady Perci—it was a dreamy-eyed woman, pure and loving, who brought into the world a babe that for awhile promised our hearts infinite gladness. Both were washed from my side in a tempest at sea and I saw them perish. Adria has seemed very like that beloved one, Cladius—"

"And why should she not?" exclaimed the other. "I know—have learned only this night—of your earlier marriage with Eloise Fontelle, and the supposed fate of her and her babe, at a time when you were returning to Venice on the Giorga. But the babe survived."

In very few words he related the substance of what he had so recently learned from the revelations made by Santo, the fisherman.

"So, Marco Trienti, if you are indeed dying and beyond help, let it solace you to know that Adria is your own child, the daughter of Eloise Fontelle, your first wife. More, I—not Adio—am your nephew, and Adria is my cousin by your first wife, because your sister, Lady Anice, married Venturi Adello, my father."

On hearing this, the India-woman cast herself upon her knees, clasped her hands and murmured:

"God of Heaven, I am glad!—glad to know at last, that it is as I suspected: that Lady Perci was never the true mother of my babe, my treasure, Lady Adria!"

A smile of light and joy overspread the pallid face of the dying senator. In his last hour of life it was sweet to know that the magnetism which had drawn the fullest strength of fatherly affection toward Adria, was the silent, inexplicable monitor of nature.

But the voice of Phla broke the momentary stillness that followed.

"Captain Cladius! If you love Lady Adria, be after her smartly. She is in the power of Azhort, the ex-chief executioner—who, as all Venice has discovered, is the once infamously notorious Sadrac, the half-Moor pirate—and there is but one place to seek her."

"Yes," answered Cladius. "If in his power, there is only one place to seek for her."

Cladius acted promptly. With a parting pressure of Marco Trienti's cold hand, he passed from the room.

On reaching the landing a surprise greeted him in seeing Doldric, the Dane. The latter's left arm was in a sling and a bandage of canvas tightly belted across his wounded shoulder. But the right arm was free and strong, and he grasped the trenchant blade.

"Doldric, my true friend! You here!"

"Ah, my commander! I could not lie in idleness with this riot at the muzzle and knowing you to be in the midst of it."

"But your wound?"

"Pooh! A scratch, after all. By St. Mark! give me a trial."

"What of Santo?"

"By this, he is aboard the High-Watch, waiting to

guide you, as he says, to some wonderful treasure."

"Enough. Come. I am after Azhort, ex-chief of the executioners."

"I heard it muttered on the lagune, as I came hither, that, to a certainty, he is Sadrac, the half-Moor and pirate of eighteen years ago."

"True. And he abducted Adria—"

"Then you were too late, despite my warning! Well, away. Have no doubt that we shall soon wrest her from him and spear the life out of his foul wolf's carcass."

The six battle-barges moved at high speed, heading toward the "Deathsman's Fort."

In a corresponding moment a small fleet of boats containing soldiers swept obliquely outward from the arsenal front—where the rioters had met with quick and deadly repulse—also pursuing a course toward the abode of Azhort.

And still another array of armed boats pushing off from the island battery, stealthily approached the fortress at Porto di Lido.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ALARM OF THE SENTINEL.

ADRIA did not recover her senses during the remainder of the journey in the boat toward New Lazaretto.

Tobato vainly sprinkled her face with water.

"Oh! Hi! What if my prize be verily dead! Do you think she can possibly be dead, my father? Adria! Harp of my soul! Open your eyes! Hi!—do you hear? Open your eyes!"

"Cease your gabble over her!" snorted the headsman. "I do not think she is dead when nothing has been done to kill her. Listen to me. It is discovered that I am Sadrac, the pirate, who, everybody rejoiced to think, perished eighteen years ago. I heard from the mouth of Adio Adello, ere I struck him down with my knife, enough to convince me that my identity has been learned by the Council. I had a presentiment of ill-luck, hours ago. I have encountered only trouble for my pains since I entered the palace—this night, I fear, has another installment for me."

"Hi, now! In my bliss at catching Adria—my lovely queen Adria!—I forgot to ask about the treasure. You found Venturi Adello? Did he tell you where to look for the gold and precious stones that will make us all so very rich, and buy me a tubful of spangles and hire a Barbary crew for a pirate ship, and—"

"Plague of fire! Boy, your tongue was ever hung like a bell-clapper! I did not find Venturi Adello. I have not secured the treasure. There are other affairs at hand for the present. I am now known as Sadrac, the pirate. No doubt half the soldiery of Venice will storm our house—are even now searching especially for me in the riot.

The evil pair reached their frowning-fronted stronghold at about the same time that Cladius Alburno and his crew—crossing the wake of the fleeing boat some distance to the north and west—had entered and were learning of the events that transpired in the Trienti palace.

While being borne past the sentinel stationed on the outside of the "Deathsman's Fort"—Adria returned to consciousness.

"Ho! What's all this?" cried Azhort, striding into the armory-room, his eagle-and-beast eyes glaring from one to another of the piratical crowd.

"Hoo! Hoo!" cawed Bal-Balla, "you and we are in the plot of the duke, yet did not know this was to be one of the rendezvous. These men were to be led by you, to charge the canals, and come fully accredited. You are tardy. Up, now, and away to the strife. My fingers are itching!" and, as she spoke, she belted her waist with corsair pistols and gripped a hatchet and truncheon. "Come! Hoo! Death to the nobles and senators! My husband is here, at last, to lead you!"

"Death to the misrulers of Venice!" growled the fierce, vagabond band.

"Nothing of the sort! Hold!" thundered the voice of the headsman, as he planted himself in the doorway. "Not a step out of this! The plot, I think, is discovered. The whole military force of Venice is massed, and death lies there,"—leveling a finger toward the front building.

"Hoo! Stale news! We know that!" screeched Bal-Balla. "Nevertheless, we must lend a hand, and maybe the duke will conquer the soldiers. Forward! If my husband will not lead, follow me!"

"Halt, there! Halt!" commanded Azhort, savagely. "Not a man must leave this house. It is known that I am Sadrac, the pirate, with a price on my head. No doubt a force is even now being dispatched to search for and destroy me. Listen. Do you hear those volleys outside? Bar the doors!"

Nearly all within the room hastened to act upon this order—Bal-Balla among the rest. A rattling of bolts, bars and strong chains was soon heard in various directions, mingling with the occasional bang of a heavy iron shutter, and the exclamations of the fast-working fellows.

Adria, immediately she was set upon her feet, had shrunken back to a far side of the armory room, giving one horrified glance at the rough element surrounding her, then standing, with clasped hands and drooping head, like a stone image of woe and hopelessness.

"Ah! why did I not die, to-day, with Cladius?" worded in the misery of her dizzy brain. "What fate is in keeping for me among these frightful people? How long, oh, Heaven! before my soul will escape its torments of the flesh?"

"Sweet lip! Adria of all Adrias! Look upon me!" chirruped gleeful Tobato, with his clownish grin, throwing himself on his crooked knees and pressing both palms over his callous heart. "Oh! See me!—your lover, face of light!—your ardent, earnest lover! Smile, speak, look! You are to wed me and be a queen! I am to become a pirate prince, and you will be the glorious bride! You shall have music, and slaves, and fine dresses; we'll skim the seas in my father's brave ships!"

"This, then, is my fate!" thought Adria, desolately, remembering the chill saying of the headsman, regarding his son, when she lay between the walls of the secret passage. "Sooner death by my own hand. My very increasing wretchedness is giving me new courage, now. I no longer fear to die," and, compressing her lips, firmly, the maiden drew further away from the ugly spider-shape of her

abhorrent adorer, who crawled and scraped after her on one knee, persisting in his passionate utterances.

Azhort was busy arming himself from the numerous weapons of war piled in the corners and braced against the walls—paying no attention to Adria or his love-frantic son—when the dark-browed and bearded ruffians returned in a crowd from the task of securing doors and windows.

Simultaneously the great door at the front entrance was opened and closed with a clangor of chains and snapping bolts, and the sentinel from the outside rushed in, hallooing:

"Tho, there! Azhort! A force of boats, in two parties, is coming rapidly toward this place—the nearest from the arsenal-wharf and the others from Isle Murano. I can see the moon shine on many helmets and the gleam of sword-blades and spear-points. For a truth, I think they mean an attack here!"

"Call me no longer Azhort. I am Sadrac, the pirate—and the government seeks my capture. You hear, all?—I am Sadrac, the pirate. And I am one who can well reward those ready to serve me. Throw open the magazine and closets, Fazienta—I shall call you Fazienta, since further concealment is useless. To the roof! Man the guns! Light in darkness! we shall see!"

"Viva! We fight for Sadrac, the pirate," gruffly howled the reckless men.

At this juncture of the scene in the armory-room a fourth gun boomed from the fortress of Porto di Lido, then another and another. These were directed in a murderous hail upon the armed boats approaching from the battery island, and from whose depths arose the significant cry:

"Down with the foes of Venice! Death to conspirators!"

And then, for the first, the over-bold and intriguing Duke d'Ossuna trembled in a sudden suspicion that the vast plot had been discovered in time to save the capital and hasten the punishment of those who sought its overthrow.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AT FRONT AND REAR!

THE ragged vagabond with a shaved dog, who had annoyed Adio Adello, in an earlier chapter, as the latter stood upon the quay just previous to the collision, and who after eavesdropping at the outer and ajar door of the "Deathsman's Fort" escaped the talons of Azhort by a hair's breadth—still later lunging his assassin knife into the shoulders of Doldric, the Dane, as that person was making all haste toward the home of old Santo—was one of the most experienced and efficient spies of the terrible Ten.

The high and massive door at the front entrance of the "Deathsman's Fort" being carelessly left unfastened by the disguised gondoler, Piero—or, rather, Doldric, the Dane—whose whole attention was centered upon the detestable man-wolf who had possibly slain Cladius Alburno, this spy soon had his mulish ears bent to catch the sharp series of cries, yelps and hoarse exclamations that issued in a murmur of discord from the armory-room—the door of which was also open—and sounding distinctly along the somber hallway.

After delivering the knife-blow in the shadowy and lane-narrow street, which, but for the accidental and timely stumble of Doldric, the Dane, would have ended his life, the fleet-footed and highly-exulting spy ran on to communicate to the Council the important intelligence he possessed.

"Ayho! Ayho!" he muttered, at every step and bound. "Good work for one day! Rich news! More of this unearthed plot! Captain Cladius Alburno is dead—stabbed and drowned by Azhort, ex-chief of the executioners! Ayho! Doldric, the Dane, cannot survive long after that tickle of steel I gave him! Ayho! Richest of all, I believe—by what I have heard at the devil-man's abode—that Azhort is none other than Sadrac, the half-Moor pirate, who has contrived to deceive every one with the report of his death so many years since! Let me furnish all this to the excellent Ten! There is an enormous reward, still on record, for the body of Sadrac, dead or alive! Ayho!—and a handsome gift for the one who can show where to find him! A good day's work, indeed!"

By the time the second gun was heard rumbling from the fortress at Porto di Lido the authorities had been fully informed by this spy of his discoveries and suspicions, as well as being acquainted, through other and numerous spies, of nearly every detail of the conspiracy.

After the roar of the third gun—and when the astounded rioters were beaten off with heavy loss of life and routed from the arsenal gate and its various posterns—a message was received by the commander of the arsenal guard to capture and produce Azhort, who was the infamous outlaw, Sadrac—seeking him first at his grim fort and further on the streets and canals, where all the soldiers and half the tumultuous populace, by this, were cognizant of the headsman's true and execrable identity.

Thus it transpired that, a few minutes preceding the departure of Cladius Alburno from the Trienti palace—upon a similar and determined mission—a number of boats, containing military in burnished and plumed helmets, crept out from the arsenal wharf, three abreast, making toward the owlish edifice on the New Lazaretto, from whose rampart roof of the small, malevolent red beacon swung and gleamed.

The armed boats and the battle-barges of Cladius and his crew, pursuing a convergent course, were shortly close together, each force silent and uncertain as to what humor of host the other might be. Presently the voice of the commander of the arsenal boats came in brusque challenge:

"Cio! Who are you, there?"

"First, who are you?" responded Cladius, from the leading barge.

"Soldiers! And foes to conspirators! Name yourselves quickly!"

"Tell them who I am, my men."

"Cladius Alburno! Friends to Venice!" rose in concert from the sturdy sailors. Instant commotion was discernible in the boats. The announcement that Cladius Alburno, the man denounced as a traitor, was before them with, doubtless, his own famous and invincible crew—coupled to a suspicion that he was in league with the conspirators—very naturally caused a sensation.

The barges were slowly closing in.

"Hold off, there, Cladius Alburno!" uneasily cried the commander of the arsenal force.

"Ah! Captain Iridi—is it you? Surely you do not bear me hostile grudge? We were once warm friends—'twas not so long ago. Though the Council has seen fit to call me a traitor, and that without stating wherein my treason lies, can you, who have known my affection and seen the record of my deeds, deem me guilty without a hearing? I am abroad to-night to battle in behalf of Venice. The guard-boats of the lagune can testify that, but for me, the whole element of riot concentrated toward Malamocco would now be infesting and devastating the streets of the capital."

"True, Cladius," replied the captain, with feeling, "you and I were once fast friends. My heart is pained to know of your disgrace. But we are both soldiers. A soldier dare not recognize a friend when he is proclaimed a traitor and banned by government; and all are forbid—"

"Then go your way, Captain Iridi. Let there be no blood spilled between us. But you will hear of me again and the day will be when you may remember what I now say to you. Venice is ungrateful! That is all! On, now, my men! On to the 'Deathsman's Fort'!"

"Hal! Why go you there?" called Captain Iridi, as the strong-oared barges swept ahead of him.

"To capture or slay Sadrac, the half-Moor pirate!" came the answer.

"By all the saints and powers! Friend, foe, traitor, or aught else, Cladius, to-night we are on duplicate duty! 'Tis my very object—the capture or death of that same dog, Sadrac! Take you the rear of the building—I will attack the front. If Sadrac is in his stone fort we shall soon get at him. Forward!"

"Be it so, Captain Iridi. To-night we will fight in a common cause. And to-morrow—in a tone that none could overhear—"if God prospers me in my attempt to rescue Adria, let Venice call me what it chooses, for I shall be far away. Land below the house of the headsman," he ordered.

The approach of the hostile craft—the barges of Cladius crossing obliquely ahead of the arsenal boats—was observed by the sentinel, who immediately gave the alarm.

And while the horde of villains within the building were loading themselves with weapons from the closets thrown open by Bal-Balla—and some carrying huge baskets of stones and other missiles to the rampart roof, jamming up the sable-painted stairway—two-score of the intrepid crew of the High-Watch were marching in a solid body along the cramped lane or alley at the rear of the "Deathsman's Fort"—a way unlighted except by the moon and the distant conflagration—finally halting at a gate of strong iron and spiked bars that was the only opening in a high, smooth wall surrounding the premises.

Captain Iridi, with his force from the arsenal, was almost under the shadow of the grim, ominously silent abode.

The crew of Cladius planted a petard against the gate, then paused to await the signal of attack momentarily expected to sound from the front.

Doldric plucked at the sleeve of his commander, saying, guardedly:

"Look, Captain Cladius. Some one comes this way."

A figure was gliding swiftly down the path that led from the rear door to the gate in the high wall. She was running, casting short glances over her shoulder, as if fearing pursuit. A few seconds later, a half-smothered exclamation broke from Cladius. His keen eyes, aided by love, had recognized Adria.

CHAPTER XXX. FLIGHT OF THE LOVERS.

In the intense excitement created by the alarm of the sentinel and the quick, hoarse command of Azhort, the presence of Adria was for the moment forgotten. Even cackling and grinning, Tobato was startled from the ludicrous volume of his love-making and sprung upon his little bow-legs with a vicious snap.

"Hi! So, they are coming after my father, eh? Yes, up to the roof! Man the guns! Oh! we will show them, whoever they may be, that we know how to fight! I am glad that we are to have a fight with somebody!"

"Hoo! Hoo! Make haste, laggards! Arm, there, and carry up these stones and darts!" spluttered the tigress wife of the headsman.

Azhort was already in the lead. Snatching a fresh quiver of arrows from the wall, Tobato bounded after his parent.

Neglected by the eyes of those around her, Adria drew shrinkingly behind the effigy that had been rendered headless shortly before by the arrow from Tobato's long bow.

Bal-Balla was last to leave the armory-room, carrying in one arm a pile of javelins and in the other a basket full of explosive shells.

"I do not think they can break through either door or window," she said, to herself, ascending the pitchy dark stairway behind the jostling, growling ruffians. "These doors and windows were doubly strengthened when my husband, Sadrac, obtained the property, in anticipation of an emergency like this. Hoo! It is strange to me that the Council should have discovered him to be Sadrac, the pirate, at this particular time, when we ought to be outside, fighting for the duke, instead of being cooped up in here to defend our lives. Tooth of Satan mince such ill-luck, say I!"

In a brief space Adria was alone. Listening till the dull tramp of the savage men grew faint, she stole timidly forth into the unlighted hall.

"Now may Heaven guide me!" she prayed, fleeing on tiptoe from the armory-room and groping her way with abated breath.

Her flight brought her to the rear door—a door studded with rivets, as large and heavy as that at the front entrance—and eagerly her fingers began to fumble with the huge bolts, intricate chains and ponderous lock, her heart fluttering as she succeeded, slowly though surely, aided only by the sense of touch, in undoing the fastenings without noise.

By the time Captain Iridi had arrived to within a few yards of the dismal-fronted fort-of-a-house, and as the crew of Cladius were planting the petard against the barred and spiked gate at the rear, Adria

had opened the door wide, and, scarce able to repress a cry of relief, ran out upon the hard, earthen pathway.

She knew nothing of the high wall, at first—believing herself free, so far, from the clutches of her horrible persecutors—and the glance that showed her the insurmountable barrier also wrung from her panting lips a groan of new despair.

It was as she stopped short in the path that Cladius recognized her.

Simultaneously came the roar from the top of the "Deathsman's Fort," the belching thunder of a brass gun that shook the air around.

"Fly the fuse!" cried Doldric.

Almost blending in the boom of the gun burst the quivering discharge of the petard, tearing, breaking, riving asunder the spike-headed bars of the gate.

Cladius was first through the breach, closely followed by Doldric and the cheering sailors.

"Charge!" loudly shouted the Dane. "Yonder door is open. If we are quick enough we shall soon have those within at our swords'-points. Charge!"

"Adria! My love!—my life!" called Cladius.

The maiden, frightened by this disturbance from an unexpected quarter and the charge of the men through the breach, turned off to flee along one of the bushy side-paths of the tangled garden.

"Adria! Adria! Do you not know me?"

The voice of her lover was magic in her ears.

"Cladius! Can it be? Is it you?"

"Ay, my own Adria! This way, sweetheart! Come, ere you are in danger!"

"Cladius! Oh, my Cladius!" and she was in his arms.

"Pass her back and leave some to guard her! We want your sword!" advised Doldric, as he charged past at the head of the madly-cheering sailors.

"Dear Adria, detain me not! I am needed by my crew. Hey, lads! three of you bear this lady company beyond the gate, and remain with her till my return. Go with them, love, for they are your friends."

Checking with a hurried kiss whatever she might have said, Cladius tore himself from her embrace and dashed on to join his crew, now pouring in through the door so opportunely opened by Adria.

Captain Iridi had halted his boats close to the landing, and bade one of the soldiers advance to thump with a spear-haft on the iron-timbered door.

"Hollo, within!" he cried, in summons.

"Well—who are you? What do you seek?" was the response from the roof, and the visage of Azhort peered from the squares of the turret-like breastwork.

"If thou art Azhort, ex-chief of the executioners, open this door and surrender—I command you!"

"To whom?"

"The powers of Venice!"

"And for what?"

"Because you are Sadrac, the half-Moor—dog-of-a-pirate! Surrender!"

"Fury of air! Whoever I am, you will find it hot work to drag me out of this. Hal! ha! ha! I am prepared for you!" defied the hoarse, harsh voice of the headsman; and to a certain few who stood near him, awaiting his signal, he said:

"Now give it them smartly! Fire!"

In the same instant that Azhort gave the command to "fire," Captain Iridi ordered his soldiers to storm the entrance, which they did with a battering-ram brought in one of the boats for the purpose. As the ram struck the stout door, shaking iron and timber from peak to sill, a brass cannon on the roof roared and flamed forth, dealing a shower of stones, glass and innumerable bits of missiles into those boats which had not yet reached the landing—and down from above, on the heads of the soldiers at the door, pelted a vast quantity of grenades, darts, spears, that rattled on the burnished helmets like hail and hissed and exploded among their buskins with no little damage.

"Stand firm! Give it another stroke! Now another!" encouraged Captain Iridi, clutching his teeth in pain from a wound on his shoulder.

Again and again the ram plunged forward till at last its cumbersome front, dislocating bolts, snapping chains, rending through rivets and timber, beat down the door amid a cloud of splinters and a loud crash.

Over the debris, angry and wounded, sprung Captain Iridi.

"Hi! Hi!" bawled Tobato, from the rear part of the roof, where he was rapidly letting fly his arrows among the charging sailors, led by Doldric, the Dane. "Hi! Hi! Look here, my father! Here comes another lot through the garden! I think we shall all be captured and killed!"

"Fiends of the pit!" howled the infuriate headsman, knowing well the meaning of that crash below, and waving his arms about him with the aspect of a demon. "I thought the door was stronger! They have forced the entrance! Down all! Meet them on the stairway!"

"Hold the stairway!" screeched Bal-Balla.

"Hi! Here they come! Give it to them in the dark!" yelled Tobato.

With an answering howl the ruffian horde slipped down through the wide scuttle.

In at the front came the grim, trained soldiers—in at the back rushed the cheering sailors of the High-Watch.

"Iridi and Venice!"

"Alburno and victory! Viva!"

"Death to Sadrac, the pirate!"

"Charge! Charge!"

Then ensued a fearful struggle on the stairs, enveloped in blackness, impenetrable. Pistols flashed, steel smote steel, groans, yells and agonized curses deafened the ear.

On pressed the soldiers and sailors, striking and lunging ahead, aimlessly, but with terrible effect, and trampling an occasional prostrate form.

On—up—up through the scuttle, despite the sweeps of the great two-handed ax—and Azhort was before them, a sight to behold in the horrible frenzy of his rage and the broad blade gripped in desperate poise. The headsman was at bay.

"Down with him! By St. Mark!—death to the abominable Sadrac!" sounded the voice of Doldric,

the Dane, who was forcing over the roof those who still resisted.

A minute later Azhort threw up his hands with a blood-curdling shriek, and sunk down, pierced by a dozen swords and lances.

In an effort to protect her hideous husband, Bal-Balla had her skull crushed by a truncheon.

Tobato, crazed by the scene and the death of his evil parents, seemed like an imp beside himself. Sending his last arrow into the crowd of victors, he ran and leaped from the roof, with one loud, sharp: "Hi!"

He had aimed to fall into the water, and escape by swimming. But the leap was too short, and he was afterward found lying on the stone-landing, mangled to death by the concussion.

As sudden the riot, as sudden the squelching, and a summary doom was in waiting for the head-spirits of the conspiracy.

The murmur of tumult and the clatter of bells ceased; only a scattering shout was to be heard here and there near several smoking ruins. Bonfire and rocket and signal flame died out; a weird, hushed spell settled over the marble city within a few hours.

But the work of The Ten was not yet over.

The High-Watch dropped out from Ma'amocco favored by the tide, its decks, above and below, as silent as the grave. But when safely distant on the bosom of the broad sea, cheer upon cheer was given for the group that stood beneath the swelling canvas, and the spacious after-cabin was made to glow with illumination and colored festoons.

Cladius, Adria, Doldric and Santo were speeding awav from Venice, surrounded by a crew ready and devoted to the last man. Staffo, the market-boy, had found means to forward a heavy purse to his aged mother, with information of his new fortune and destiny, which pleased her greatly.

With the first light of day many of the populace, who had not as yet conceived the full import of the conspiracy—they who had no hand in it—were surprised to see a number of bodies hanging lifeless by the square of St. Mark. Some of the misled and wretched beings were tried, condemned and executed within the precincts of the Ducal Palace; others were quietly drowned in the canal. The ambassador was escorted beyond the boundaries of the Republic—D'Ossuna and Dom Pedro de Toledo were swiftly punished for their share in the plot so nearly fatal to the "City of the Sea."

On his own good ship Cladius Alburno learned from the lips of Adria the nature of the charge that had been preferred against him before the Council—she repeating what had been told her by the senator in that interview during which she had beheld the eyes of Azhort glaring at her from the painted portrait of Rupert Riali.

It is almost needless to say that the charge was a falsehood concocted by that unscrupulous woman, Lady Perci, though put so cunningly and strengthened by the disappearance of Cladius, that the Council were fain to accept it as a verity. The sworn statement of the whole crew, attesting the lie of the charge, was forwarded to the Government of Venice at the same time that Cladius, in all honor, returned to the vessel.

Securing the immense treasure that had for years been buried beneath a double and false earthen cellar floor of the fisherman's hut on the lower coast—the spot of Santo's yearly visits mentioned previously—Cladius, Adria, Doldric, Santo and Staffo sought the shore of England, where many warm friends greeted our hero.

Adria, during the voyage, was made fully acquainted with the whole story we have seen old Santo reveal to Cladius. Joy unspeakable filled her heart to learn that Marco Trienti, whom she always so dearly loved, was her own father, though it was a sad accompaniment to hear the detail of his undoubted death.

Much to the surprise of all, the maiden seemed deeply and strangely affected by the discovery of so close a relationship existing between herself and the one man of all men she adored. Instead of yielding gladly to the earnest pleadings of her lover for an early union, she demanded one whole year: first in memory of her father; second, to debate in her own mind the expediency of her marriage with her cousin.

But Heaven was kind to these devoted hearts and sent intelligence that set aside all scruple. Ere the year rolled around they were joined by Phila, the India-woman. She brought with her certain papers given her by the dying senator, revealing a secret the wise old Santo had never suspected.

Marco Trienti and the Lady Anice—wife of Venturi Adello—were not brother and sister of one flesh. The father of Trienti, a widower, had wedded the mother of little Lady Anice, a widow, and by no special design it had ever been supposed that the children were of the same union, which had occurred during a long residence abroad by both parents.

Some years later, Cladius was invited again to an important command in the Venetian fleet. But he preferred his quiet life of wealth and love, amid his few tried friends, blessed by the smiles of Adria, his beauteous bride.

THE END.

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